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THE

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OR,

THE RANGER'S BRIDE.

BY W. J. HAMILTON,

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THE QUADROON SPY.

CHAPTER I.

GUY.

IN a hollow of a rolling prairie in Texas a band of men had made their camp. A strange band it was, men of all ages and nationalities, who had crowded into the Lone Star State from other sections to make a new home and nation—rough-and-ready fellows, in the plain dress of the prairie-man and farmer, nearly all wearing the fringed hunting-shirt and broad sombrero, the best dress for that section. Their horses, of mustang breed, were picketed in a circle about the camp upon the short prairie-grass, upon which they were feeding with an avidity which showed that they were not long rested from the march. Fires were lighted in various places, at which the men were cooking their evening meal.

It was a part of that famous band known as Texan Rangers, who did so much to free the Lone Star State from its thrall-dom to Mexico. Their bearded faces, as the sunlight fell upon them, showed that they were inured to every conceivable hardship—men who had fought the Indian, the jaguar and the bear—had starved in the cañons and had thirsted on the deserts—had faced the cold blasts of the “norther” and the sirocco of the sand-plains.

They were “larking” with each other now, while preparing food, telling queer stories of border life, or starting up to try a fall with some expert wrestler upon the green turf. Their officers, three in number, were grouped by themselves. One of them, evidently the leader, was a border-man *par excellence*—a queer-looking specimen of humanity, tall and muscular, with a lean and hungry look about the face, but hardly the man you would like to meet as an enemy. His only insignia of rank was a major’s leaf upon the shoulder of his hunting-shirt. His dress otherwise was the same as that of his companions in arms, and a description of his weapons will suffice for the

others. A long rifle, of terrible use in such hands; a pair of horsemen's pistols, and a heavy knife, just introduced by the celebrated Colonel Bowie, of Arkansas—a fearful weapon, with a blade fourteen inches long, curved like a Malay kreeze, and so heavy that it would cut a man down as rapidly as a saber.

The person who stood next to him was a young man of powerful build, with a handsome, frank, manly face, shaded by clustering masses of curling brown hair. In stature he was nearly six feet high, and finely proportioned. He showed somewhat more foppishness in his dress than the rest, for his hunting-shirt was of fine green cloth, braided and embroidered neatly, and his pistols and rifle-stock were beautifully mounted in silver. The other officer, the lieutenant, was a rough-and-ready sort of man, of middle size, past the middle age.

"I wish Guy would come in, Ralph," said the major. "Thar; I'm a little skeery about the boy. Mortal 'fraid he's got into trouble, he's so blamed venturesome. Now, look here; Guy Gaudelet ain't much on the fight, but he's a mortal good scout and spy, I *ask* you."

"Yes, he is," said the lieutenant. "You never said a truer word than that, Ned Dimmick. I wish he'd come in, for I'm thinking that immortal thief, Tom Egerton, is snaking round to get a cut at the rangers. I wish he'd show himself, that's all."

"Who is this Egerton?" said the young captain whom Ned Dimmick had called Ralph.

"I forgot that you were a new man here, captain," said Lieutenant Swinton. "Tom Egerton is a renegade Englishman, who has taken it on himself to fight against Texas. I've sworn an eternal oath that when we meet he shall go down, or else Ned Dimmick will lose his lieutenant. He's a mortal enemy of Texas, because they think we've got a hankering arter the United States. But he's wrong; he's mighty wrong. Texans must be free men, and whether they jine the United States or not is their own business. But one thing is sartin, they won't hang on to the skirts of a set of greasers, that I know."

"Is this Egerton a good fighting man?" asked the captain.

"I'll speak fair of him, I will," said Dimmick. "He ar'; he's a scoundrel, but he can fight outrageous hard. I un-

wretched mad at the pizon snake, but I'll give him credit for what he's worth, anyhow. He's trained about two hundred greasers so that they ar' right good bush-fighters, too, and they've give me a good deal of trouble. Guy is after them now, trying to find out whar they ar'; and he'll do it, ef they don't git hold of him while he's trying it on. What's that, Jim?"

The last question was directed toward a ranger who had been posted at the edge of the timber which inclosed the camp on three sides, and who came running into camp.

"A horseman, major. Riding straight for camp."

"Take Wetherby and Nickolson and ride out to meet him. If it's a greaser, you know what to do."

The three men selected were in the saddle at once, and rode hastily out of camp. They had hardly cleared the timber when a peculiar whistle, which Ned Dimmick had taught his men, sounded from the prairie outside, and the major said:

"It's all right, whoever it may be. Guy Gaudelet, I reckon."

The sound of horses at a gallop could be heard, and the three men emerged from the cover, followed by a young man of such remarkable personal appearance that he deserves more than passing notice. As he cleared the woods he gave his horse the spur and rode in advance of the men, waving his plumed hat in a boyish manner, while he leaped his light mustang completely over a horse which was lying down in his path, lifting him to the leap with a clear-voiced shout, and the next moment was beside the party of officers, saluting them by touching the hat which he had replaced upon his head after the leap. He was a slight young man, in a neat uniform of dark-green cloth, which fitted his symmetrical figure to a charm. His face was very brown, and it needed but a single glance to see that he had a slight taint of Indian or negro blood in his veins. But, though dark, his face was almost feminine in its mold, with a small mouth, full, red lips, and a pair of eyes of which any woman might have been proud. His hair was dark and cut short, and curled in clustering rings about his noble forehead, under the small jockey hat he wore, in which waved a black plume. His feet were encased in small boots, armed with the inevitable spur; the hand which held the bridle was

small and shapely. His weapons were pistols and a **Bowie** knife, both richly mounted. A cheer broke from the men as they saw him, for Guy Gaudet, the Quadroon Spy, as he was called, was well known and loved by every man who fought under the banner of the Lone Star. He waved his hand in a courteous manner to the men, and dismounted quickly and stood holding his horse by the bridle.

"What news, Guy?" said Dimmick. "Speak up, my boy."

"Egerton is on the march, and looking for you," replied the young spy, quickly.

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"Where was he?"

"He crossed the Rio yesterday, and is now camped twenty miles away, to the north of Brownsville. He swears that he will never go back until he has defeated Dimmick's rangers."

"He ain't likely to see Monterey in a hurry, then," said Dimmick, "curse his impudence. Does he think to ride over us like sheep?"

"He has three hundred men. Besides his own lancers who are well drilled, he has picked a hundred of the best men from the Mexican lancers and he has drilled them. How many can you raise?"

"I've got a hundred and twenty men here," said Dimmick, "and if they kain't chaw up and gouge out the eyes of any five hundred men that ever rode in Mexican skins, may I be throwed cold the next minnit. Does he strike for me first?"

"He will clear every thing in his path, and the Hacienda la Vega lies in his way. I pray you, Major Ned, if you care any thing for me, do not let that noble house be ruined. Among all Mexicans Don Jose la Vega has been faithful to the Texans, and has cried out against Santa Anna for attempting to reduce them to the position of conquered subjects. Save the hacienda, if you can, for they tell me that the villainous Egerton has vowed that he will lay it even with the ground."

"Trust me, boy. I know Don Jose la Vega is a true friend to our cause, for he has aided us with men and money. I'll be chawed to death by wild-cats before I'll see him injured. That's as good as swore to."

"Thank you, major. I knew that you would stand by the faithful in their distress. You know me well enough to believe that I have dedicated my life to the cause of Texas, with Crockett, Bowie, and the rest. Sam Houston has thanked me personally for what little I have done, and that is reward enough for me. Ha! Take care, boys! Scatter, for your lives!"

CHAPTER II.

"JAGUARS!"

EVERY ranger started up, and, snatching his rifle, ran in every direction, leaving the center of the glade about the fires clear. What had caused this sudden stampede among men used to every danger? The question was answered by a fierce snarl and two yellow bodies bounded into the open space and lay prostrate, looking about with fiery eyes. Guy Gaudelet had bounded into the saddle, and as he reached it one of the intruders rose into the air with a shrill snarl, and, had the mustang remained still, the brave young man must have fallen a victim. But, the trained steed knew his danger, and bounded quickly under the touch of the spur, and the fierce assailant dropped upon the sward in the very spot where he had stood. Before he could turn, the mustang was a hundred feet away. Guy Gaudelet had remained long enough to draw the attention of the animal from his companions, who were on foot, and had thus saved some man's life by his promptitude.

Jaguars! There is no animal upon the Texan plains more feared and hated. When instigated by hunger they will boldly attack man, though otherwise their secret and cat-like habits prompt them to hide at his approach. There they lay, their yellow sides relieved by the black spots which marked them, and constitute almost their only difference from the tiger. In lightness, strength and ferocity they are little inferior to their Asiatic brethren, as the rangers well knew.

"Wagh," said a tall fellow in a greasy hunting-shirt

"That was clever of you, Guy Gaudet. They'd 'a' took arter some of us ef it hadn't bin fur the boy. Let's see whether Long Bill Epps has forgot how to shoot."

His rifle was not loaded, and he stopped, facing the jaguars, who had lain down side by side, their heads between their outstretched paws, and their green eyes moving restlessly from side to side, as if they could not decide whether to assail the horses or pursue the men. Most of the animals, snorting in terror, had either broken the lariats or pulled up the stakes and escaped, but one, not ten feet from the yellow brutes, though tugging desperately at his lariat, had not succeeded either in breaking it or dragging the stout peg from the soil into which it had been driven. His snorting and stamping drew the attention of the jaguars at length, and Long Bill saw that they were about to move. It was his horse which claimed their attention. The rifle-stock was laid lovingly against his cheek, and he looked through the double sights. But, just as he pulled, the jaguars rose into the air, and alighted upon the unfortunate horse, which uttered an almost human cry of terror, and struggled more desperately than ever. Vain; the teeth of the male tiger were fastened in the throat of the mustang, and he was dragged down, while the female alighted upon his back with a force which broke the spine, and the horse lay dead under the terrible teeth and claws. Lying prostrate behind the body of the horse, they tore away the bloody flesh, growling fiercely over their ensanguined meal. Long Bill, seeing the fate of his horse, snatched a rifle from the hands of a companion and ran round to a place where he could get a fair shot at his enemy, the male jaguar. Dropping upon one knee, he took good aim, and the rifle cracked. They saw the head of the fierce brute drop suddenly to the earth, and he rolled over on his side, while his mate leaped up with a snarl of rage, for the bullet, passing completely through the body of her mate, had wounded her slightly in the shoulder.

"Laid *him* out, any way," growled Bill Epps. "He won't kill nobody's hoss ag'in, he won't."

But the danger was not yet over. Incensed by the wound and enraged at the death of her companion, the jaguar started on a rapid run toward Long Bill, who, still kneeling on the grass,

was loading his rifle rapidly. Something which shows like reason in the brute creation taught her that the ranger was the cause of the sudden and terrible stillness on the part of her companion, and she was determined to avenge his death. Long Bill saw her coming, and caught the gleam of her terrible eyes. His rifle was not yet loaded, but he worked hard, desperately. Scarcely ten feet separated them, and he was about to drop his gun and seize his knife, when there was a wild, musical shout, and Guy Gaudelet, holding in his hand a long lance—which one of the rangers had reft from a Mexican captive and kept as a sort of curiosity—came bounding over the back of the jaguar, and struck at her with such quickness and skill that the lance passed completely through the creature's body, and sunk into the earth below to the depth of a foot.

With a wild scream of agony, a cry like nothing earthly, the jaguar leaped upward, and breaking the lance short off, fastened upon the flank of the agile mustang. The men uttered a cry of terror, for they thought the daring boy lost, but they saw him snatch a heavy hatchet which hung at his saddle-bow, and strike at the head of the jaguar. The horse bounded on with gashed and bleeding flanks, but the wild beast longer clung to them ; it lay extended on the earth with the hatchet buried to the bowl in her brain, a ghastly and terrible sight.

CHAPTER III.

BEAUTIFUL GAME.

GUY GAUDELET reined in his panting and frightened horse, and looked back at the dead jaguar, while the men gathered about him, complimenting him highly upon his address and courage. Ralph Lennox saw that he drew his breath hard, and that his lips were white, and understood that his was one of those natures that can meet danger boldly, if need be, but who are overcome when it is past. Ned Dimmick thrust the others somewhat rudely aside and aided the brave young fellow to dismount.

"Oh, git away, boys," he said. "Don't bother the boy now. Thar ain't no braver a boy, though I *do* say it, in the kentry between the Sabine and the Rio Grande. Ned Dimmick says it, and he is *some*, now I tell ye! Come and set down, Guy, and you chaps keep away. What one among you would dare to ride over a wounded jaguar, with nothing in his hand but a lance? Just you set here, boy, while I look arter your hoss. Tiger claws are mighty pizen things, I reckon, and that leetle hoss desarves good keev, if ever a leetle hoss did in this world, for his master's sake. But it won't do for you to ride him, my boy. I've got a hoss to spare and you shall have him."

"Thank you. Am I to go out again?"

"We can't do without Guy Gaudet," replied the major, laughing lightly. "You've got to take that horse and ride out toward the hacienda and see if Tom Egerton is on the march. Curse him, I'll make him sorry he ever took arter Ned Dimmick, with malice prepense and aforethought, as the rotted old lawyer said when I shot Bill Everson for insulting little Nell Granger."

"Give me my orders, Ned," said the young scout, rising. "You know me, and action, *action* is my motto. I think I would have made a good knight in the days of old, when chivalric deeds were done."

"*Bet* you would!" smiled Ned Dimmick. "But I don't like to send you out now. The marcies of these unfeeling Mexican greasers are cruel. I want you to be keerful; you know what store old man Dimmick sets by you."

"I know that you are kinder to me than I deserve," replied the scout, promptly. "All that I have done, all that I am doing, is for the honor and glory of the Lone Star. When Texas is free, and Sam Houston sits in the Presidential chair at Austin, I shall be satisfied to retire. Until then all my energies are given to this work. Spirits of the noble dead, if from your bright home beyond the distant blue you can look down upon me, say that I have never, even for a moment, wavered in my allegiance to the land I love so well!"

"Hooray!" screamed Ned Dimmick. "That's the way to talk it! Texas must be, she shall be free, if there be any power in the arms of the Texan Rangers! We'll wade in blood, we'll whip our weight in wild-cats, do any thing rather than

old Santa Anna shall enter Austin. Thar; don't git me on this string, you pizon leetle critter, or you'll drive me mad. Take that roan hoss, and *git!* Captain Lennox will march out with ten men half an hour after you go, and if thar's no danger, you will signal him from the eastern tower of the hacienda. If thar's danger, you put back and let him know. He will take the north road, and you are sure to meet him."

Guy Gaudelet led out the roan designated by the major and sprung lightly into the saddle, waving his cap as he cantered out of the camp, while the men cheered him lustily, Long Bill Epps leading the applause by a war-cry that made their ears tingle.

"Oh, yes," said Dimmick, "yell, you pizon critter, *du!* Ef it hadn't been for yonder boy the jaguar would 'a' throwed you cold."

"Don't I know it, major?" said Long Bill. "See here, that boy has made a friend to-day. Not much of a friend, perhaps, but one that will stick to him through thick and thir, till he goes under."

"Who says you wouldn't, Long Bill?" said Dimmick, good-naturedly. "I'm glad you like the boy, for I'd jump down any man's throat that didn't. Hi, thar, Captain Lennox. I want you."

The captain came over from examining the dead jaguars, and the two remained in close conference for half an hour. At the end of that time Lennox called ten men by name, and they rode out of camp upon the trail of the young scout, armed to the teeth. Their way led them to a well-beaten track across the wooded prairie, the fragrant breezes of that delightful climate fanning their faces as they rode. The men chosen by Lennox were the very flower of Dimmick's rangers, selected for their desperate bravery in the hour of danger—men who cared no more for the perils of a battle than the common events of life. With them, to hunt down greasers, to fight and drink, to play cards and hunt the buffalo, were every-day *pleasures*: and they rode to battle as to a festival.

They had ridden through a tangled patch of fern which had grown up from a marshy spot on either side of a log road, when they heard a horse's feet, and looking ahead saw a woman on horseback riding slowly toward them, with her hee-

bent as if in deep thought. The rattle of their accouterments caused her to look up quickly, and she wheeled her horse sharply and rode away at full speed.

"Keep on toward the hacienda, boys," cried the captain. "I am going to see who that girl is."

"Go it, cap," roared Bill Epps, who was one of the party. "I'll hold your hat."

Ralph Lennox touched his horse with the spur and he made a sudden leap and then stretched forward at a gallop, while the captain bent forward in the saddle to catch a glimpse of the flying equestrienne. She turned her horse aside and dashed into a bridle-path through the mesquit bushes, and accepting the challenge Ralph rode after. Why he did it, he could not have said, but there was something so saucy in the action of the rider that he could not help a feeling of pique, as the horses bounded on. "I'll catch her," he muttered through his set teeth, "or I'll break my neck trying. Stretch away, good horse. She's got a mustang there, and he goes like a flash."

When he broke through the bushes into the open ground he saw the object of pursuit two hundred yards away, riding with the ease and grace of a practiced horsewoman over a country which would have puzzled a tyro in horsemanship. They were now in the midst of what would be called a "deadening" in the the West, where the timber had been cut down and left to dry before they set fire to it. The logs were piled in every shape just as they fell, forming any thing but a pleasant place to ride through. Just in front of the girl was a log over three feet high, and she rode at it at a sharp canter and sent her horse over with a stroke of the whip and a lift at the rein, to the utter astonishment of Ralph, who followed her a moment after. She looked back at him with a bright smile and waved her whip at him derisively as she cleared another obstruction in the path.

"I believe the minx is laughing at me," thought Ralph. "It certainly looks like it. But I'll follow her anyhow."

They cleared the deadening at length, and the distance between them was considerably shortened, though she still kept a lead of over a hundred yards. The horses were now flying down a sloping ground covered with sage bushes, and in front of them stretched a gully nearly twenty feet wide, with a

stream flowing through it. "That must turn her," murmured the soldier. Turn her? Not a bit of it! She approached it on the loping run peculiar to the mustang, and touching him with the whip flew over it like a bird, alighting safe and sound upon the other side. Ralph settled himself in the saddle and rushed his horse at the gully. He did the jump well, but by so close a shave that the loose earth tumbled down as the hoofs struck the earth.

Away they went again, at the same breakneck pace, and the young soldier saw that they were nearing the boundaries of some ranche, for, just in front, was a long hedge of stumps and roots five feet high, bristling with broken branches. Would she dare attempt it? Evidently she did, for she never drew rein, and the captain had a momentary glimpse of a bright, beautiful face full of saucy spirit, as the mustang rose to the leap. She disappeared, and a cry of pain followed.

Ralph crossed the hedge lower down, and as he reached the other side he saw that the mustang had fallen with his rider, who lay senseless on the sod. Lennox sprung from his saddle, ran to her and lifted her in his arms. The face was very pale, but beautiful even then. A slight girl, dressed like a Mexican lady of the better class, with the oval features which proclaimed her Andalusian blood. Her eyes were closed, and there was blood upon her temple. Lennox put back the short clustering hair to look for the wound, and saw that it was a slight one, and that it could not have been that which caused her to faint.

There was a pool of water not far away, and he ran with her to the place. Still supporting her upon one arm, he began to bathe her face with the cool water. Her color came back slowly, she gave a little gasp and opened her eyes. Seeing herself reclining in the arms of the young soldier, she withdrew herself quickly and rose to her feet, looking at him in a strange, fixed way, with a half smile playing about her red lips.

"Who are you, sir?" she said, slowly, speaking better English than he had expected. "Why did you pursue me?"

"Say that my awkwardness and obstinacy have not done you any injury and I am content," he said, quickly. "As to my reason for pursuing you, I can only say I had no good one, but you seemed to challenge me and I accepted the challenge."

I am more grieved than I can express at the accident forced upon you by me."

"It was my own fault, señor," she said. "I ought to have taken the hedge a few feet further down. My horse tripped upon a root and threw me. I must have struck my head against something, for I think I fainted."

"You did, indeed. I beg your pardon for chasing you in that absurd manner, señora. My name is Ralph Lennox; I am a captain in the Texan Rangers."

"Ah," said the lady, with a slight smile. "I have heard of Captain Lennox before."

"May I ask where?"

"Before the war, you danced with me at Matamoras at the house of Señor Maraus."

"I? Are you, then—"

"The Señora Inez La Vega, at your service. Ha, señor, you thought I didn't know you! I thought to give you a race, and I succeeded admirably, but I fear I have hurt my horse."

"You will never ride him again," said Ralph, sadly. "His neck is broken."

"Ah!" she cried, the pupils of her beautiful dark eyes dilating. "You must not say so; it is too terrible. My poor little horse! Has my mad frolic cost me your life?"

She threw herself on her knees beside the body of the snow-white mustang, and half raised its head, but, though the eyes stared wide open, life was gone forever. The pretty fondness which she showed for the dead horse, touched a tender cord in the breast of the young soldier.

"I can not sufficiently blame myself, señora," he said, as he raised her. "My own stupid obstinacy, not your flight, is to blame for this sad ending. But, consider that you have escaped a terrible danger yourself, and be thankful, and make up your mind to avoid such terrible leaps in future."

"Ah, señor captain, you do not know me. I should do the same thing again to-morrow, if I had the opportunity. So you had forgotten having met me in Matamoras?"

"Forgotten *you*? Señor, what I told you then I have a mind to repeat. I told you—"

"Not to-day, captain! I will not hear you. Let us walk on, unless you are *tired* and would prefer riding."

"You have not forgotten your bitter way of speaking," he said. "I think you should be kinder to me now."

"You forced me to ride over that fence, and I am very revengeful!" she said, as he loosened the lariat at his saddle, and passed the end through the bit-ring. "Was not that a happy time in Matamoras, when Mexico and Texas were one, and there was no thought of war from the sea to the gulf? What does Houston seek?"

"You can not deceive me, señora," said the young captain. "You are known far and wide as a friend of Texas; so much so, that Santa Anna has sworn to have revenge upon your father, if he is taken."

"The La Vegas are not easily frightened," she answered, haughtily.

"True; but it is well to take due precautions. A sea of fire and blood will sweep through Texas to its utmost limits, and the State will be shaken as if by an earthquake. But she will rise, proud, triumphant; and her lone star shall shine brighter and brighter until the dawn of day."

"God grant it!" said the lady, solemnly. "May you and I live to see it! Why did you come here?"

"To warn you of coming danger."

"From whom?"

"From the band of the man known as Thomas Egerton."

"Egerton!"

"Yes. We have information from a spy, that he is approaching with a strong band of men from the vicinity of Matamoras, with the avowed intention of rooting out rebellion in this district, and especially of breaking up the rangers. I am assured that he will not pass by the hacienda without taking vengeance upon the owner, for some real or fancied slight put upon him."

"He will not find the insult very slight, which we of the house of La Vega give to men of his class," said the girl, setting her teeth hard. "A wretch like Thomas Egerton, without a spark of pity or humanity in his breast—a man who would not hesitate at any crime, however great, is forever our enemy."

"You speak with deep feeling."

"I have reason. If you knew this man as I do, his

baseness, the cruel deeds he has done, you would not wonder that I hate him. It is such men as those who stain the name of Mexico—a name once great among the nations. He is a renegade and villain, who has fled from his own country to find in ours a refuge from his crimes, and to commit new ones."

" Whatev'er he has done he is my enemy, and the time is not far off when he shall suffer. Ned Dimmick has sworn it; I have sworn it; and we have men enough to make our words good."

" May the time come soon!"

" It is not far off. When the rangers have set their hearts upon an object, it shall go hard but they will find their way to it by fair means or foul."

" You would not use foul means, even with a villain like this?"

" That was a form of speech. Perhaps I would not, though he would not hesitate at *any* means to accomplish our destruction."

" How many have you brought with you?"

" Ten men, the pick of Dimmick's rangers."

" The hacienda is very strong. Do you not think you could defend it against them?"

" I can not tell. At least we could die in your defense, and it would not be long before Dimmick and his men would come to our relief. You know the major?"

" No one better. A good man, though a little rude at times—a man whose heart is right, although the outside husk is a rough one. No one is better known, or more feared by the soldiers of Mexico than your commander. But hist! Did you not hear a sound?"

" Where?"

" On the other side of the hedge, I thought."

The captain ran to the hedge and climbed to the top. As he did so, he uttered a low exclamation and leaped over. Inez La Vega, stepping upon a projecting root, looked over, and saw a man in a gaudy dress running like a deer for the woods, closely followed by the captain, knife in hand. As she looked, they closed, and rolled to the earth together, while knives flashed in the rays of the descending sun.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE HACIENDA.

WITH Inez La Vega, to think and to act were synonymous terms. Darting to the horse of the captain she headed him at the treacherous fence at which she had come to grief a minute before and went over it in gallant style, riding down toward the struggling men as soon as she could get herself seated fairly in the saddle after the leap. She need not have offered her slight aid, for the trained muscles of the gallant young soldier had overcome the undisciplined strength of the other, and he rose with his knee upon the breast of the spy upon his actions.

"I yield," said the man, sullenly. "What are you about?"

"Get up," said the captain, dragging at his collar. "I want to see your face, you sneaking dog. Why were you hiding behind that fence?"

"That is my business, I suppose," was the ungracious reply. "Why do you hold me? I have done nothing to you."

"Make him show his face," cried Inez, eagerly.

"See it, then," was the reply delivered with fierce earnestness as he turned his head toward the girl. "How do you like it, Señora Inez La Vega?"

Inez uttered a low exclamation and reeled in the saddle as she saw the face, and cried:

"Pedro!"

He was a rather good-looking young Mexican of the better class, dressed in the uniform of a lancer.

"Oh, Pedro," said Inez, faintly, "have you fallen as low as this?"

"Hush," he cried. "Have done with talk, and do not dare to speak my name. It is enough that I am taken, but you at least shall throw no stain upon me."

"Captain Lennox," said Inez, "I have a favor to ask of you. Will you let this prisoner go, and say nothing about it to your major? I assure you that I have a reason for this which you

would regard as valid, but I can not tell you what it is. Enough that you will do me a great favor if you let this young man go free."

"I warn you against it," cried the Mexican. "I am the enemy to the death of all accursed Americans and Texans, and if you set me free I will use my freedom to your disadvantage. Understand me fully."

"Your word is my law, Señora Inez," said Ralph. "You owe your liberty to the intercession of this lady, sir. See that you remember it if at any time she should be in peril and you have it in your power to aid her."

"I let no one dictate terms to me. I am free to go, you say?"

"You are."

"Then take this for a warning. Not long shall you wait until the name of Texan Ranger is a thing of the past. I give you good-day."

He cast a malevolent glance at the young soldier and strode away, while Inez sat in the saddle stupefied, looking after him.

"Who is he, señora?" said Ralph. "You seemed to know him."

"Let me beg you not to ask me," she said. "It would do you no good to know, and it would grieve me to tell it. Enough that I would not see an injury done him if I could help it. Let us go to the hacienda, for I fear the storm is drawing close upon us. Did you notice the peculiar uniform worn by the man I called Pedro?"

"A green velvet doublet slashed with silver lace, with a black belt and cross-belt. It is a uniform I have never seen before."

"The uniform of Egerton's lancers—a new one, invented by the chief himself, who delights in gaudy show in his dress."

"Ha! Ride on quickly, then, and I will get to the hacienda as soon as you, for I can cross the gullies where you can not."

"A challenge," she said, and then began a race for the hacienda. The captain was first over the fence, and crossed the country in places impossible for the horse, and they came up to the gate of the hacienda together just as the ten rangers made their appearance.

"By thunder!" said Long Bill, "the captain did as he sed. He cotched the gal, but, by mighty, I guess he had to shoot her hoss."

"Silence," said Ralph. "Ride inside and corral your horses. Señora Inez, will you go to your father and say that Captain Ralph Lennox of the Texan Rangers desires to speak with him on business of importance?"

She leaped out of the saddle and ran up the steps, while the party rode into the walled inclosure about the hacienda, took off their saddles and led their horses to a place behind the building and tied them. The hacienda was one of those strong old structures which the early Mexicans delighted in building, and which, for defense against the northern Indians, were provided with strong walls, twelve feet high, inclosing a level flat of ground about the walls of the building. The structure itself was of stone, with heavy mullioned doors and windows, and iron casements, making the place impervious to any thing except artillery. The señor himself appeared—a gray-haired but hale old man, who shook hands with the captain heartily.

"My daughter speaks to me of danger," he said. "She thinks that Egerton means to strike at my house. Is this true?"

"It is. I am here for the purpose of keeping the place against him until the arrival of Dimmick."

"I knew that the storm would come," said the old man. "Let it do so, if it will. I am old enough to die, but I shall live to see the Lone Star wave triumphant in the southern breeze. You think it strange that I, a Mexican, should love Texas, but let me tell you that my wife, long since dead, was an American, and I have loved the race for her sweet sake. Inez is not half Mexican therefore, and that is the reason she is such a little rebel. What do you think we had better do?"

"Close your gates, call in your vacqueroes and cattle-drivers, and arm them. Then, if our friend Egerton comes, we will give him a warm reception."

"As for the trusty men who labor upon my ranche," said La Vega, "I count them as nothing. There are forty of them in all, and I would take five of your men, let them be mounted and leave my army of vacqueroes on foot, and the five would

put the forty to flight in a moment. Do not wonder at my having so little faith in the worthy men who fight the battles of Mexico under the banner of Santa Anna. I have seen too much of the cowardice which suffers a couple of hundred half-naked Indians to ride into a town of three thousand inhabitants, steal, burn and destroy as they like, and ride away unharmed. Manuel, you dog, here. Come quickly, or I will find a way to stir you."

A lazy-looking vacquero appeared, yawning widely, and asked what was wanted.

"I want you to mount and ride to the different stations, and bring in all the men. As a spur to your movements, I will say that Egerton is coming, and it will hardly be safe for you to stay out long."

Manuel instantly became very lame, and his knees knocked together in affright.

"Cospetto, señor," he said. "I should take delight in doing your pleasure, but unfortunately I am not well. I could not endure the fatigue of a ride to-day."

"Indeed."

"Si, señor. As a general thing, to obey you is a pleasure and honor, but I am on the sick-list to-day."

This was accompanied by a sickly grimace, which was irresistible.

"Did I not see you half an hour ago, devouring at least three pounds of beef?"

"That may well be, señor. Since you say it, it must be so. But, something I have eaten has disagreed with me, for I find myself very sick."

"I suppose you would be very much obliged to any one who would cure you."

"Alas, señor, it is impossible; I am but a frail mortal of the lust, and disease has laid its wasting hand upon me. Otherwise I should be too happy to obey your commands."

"I can cure you, nevertheless," replied La Vega, beginning to get exasperated, and snatching a riding-whip from a rack near at hand: "Take that, and that, and that! Do you like the medicine? Out of the house, you cowardly hound; go! Do as I command you, and if you are ever sick again, come to me for medicine."

Mamani darted out of the hacienda, mounted his horse, and was off at a rate which only the vacquero has any conception of. La Vega laughed heartily at the ready cure he had effected, and called to his men to see to their arms, and be ready for work at a moment's warning, for Egerton could not be far off.

"You will hear the conche sound in a few moments, brave Americans; when it does, I expect you all to do me the honor of dining with me."

With these words he turned and entered the house, signing to Ralph to follow him. They entered a neatly-furnished library, and sat down near the window.

"You have put me under obligations to you to-day, señor captain," said La Vega, "in permitting the prisoner you made to go free. For family reasons, we would not have a hair of that man's head injured. Who told you of the approach of Egerton?"

"The Quadroon Spy."

"Guy Gaudet? Ah! do you know him?"

"Who does not! Half the success of the rangers is owing to him."

"He is a singular person," added the planter.

"Yes," said the captain. "He seems to have a charmed life, and rides freely wherever he will. Such a man is invaluable to a cause like this, and the brave lad perils his life day by day. Will he ever have the glory of it? I tell you, no! In the after times, men will speak with veneration of Houston and Bowie, of Crockett and Dimmick, but the men who are the advance-guards—who take the most dangerous part of all, and make themselves Pariahs and outcasts for the good cause, *never* will get their meed of praise. I have seen this Guy Gaudet—whom I acknowledge I love as if he were my child—in peril where the stoutest heart might well flinch, yet he stood brave and confident, ready for the worst."

"Where is he now?"

"I can not tell. I expect to meet him here, but he has a roving commission, and comes and goes as he pleases. May I ask the privilege of a conversation with Señora Inez? I have to apologize for my unlucky escapade of this afternoon."

"She is in the small parlor to the west. I will send you to her."

He rung a bell, and a servant appeared.

"Conduct Captain Lennox to the west parlor, and see if the Señora Inez is there. If not, tell her that the captain requests an interview."

Inez was seated near an open window, touching a guitar which lay across her lap, and awaking musical cords. She looked up with a smile as she saw who entered, and motioned him to a seat at her side.

"I am glad you came to me," she said. "I have made up my mind to trust you with a secret. The man you captured to-day, and so nobly set at liberty without a reason, is my only brother, Pedro La Vega. How could I suffer him, though guilty of great wrong, to be taken captive, when perhaps his only object was to see me? For, sir, though engaged in a bad cause, I can but believe that he loves us."

"Let me hope so," said the captain. "But, I did not come to speak of that. To-day, when I would have spoken to you of love, you forbade me. I must speak now, for my heart is overburdened with its freight. I have loved you ever since the night I danced with you in Matamoras, and you suffered me to lift your mask. I exchanged into Dimmick's rangers, mainly because I knew of your place of residence. Dear girl, when I first saw you I loved you. I love you now, and I shall love you until I die."

"Hush," she said. "It is wrong, it is wicked for you, engaged in the cause of Texas, to waste your time in idle thoughts. Remember what your mission is, and give your heart to its accomplishment. Peace is the time to talk of love, not when war is in the land. I will not hear you."

"But, you are wrong. There is nothing which so strengthens the hearts of men fighting the battle of their country, as to know that there is some fair woman who loves them, and will reward gallant conduct. Give me this priceless privilege. Let me know that you love me, and I swear to you that it shall nerve my arm in danger's hour, and make me strong for the battle."

"You try me beyond my strength," she said, faintly. "I do not say that you have made no impression upon me. Y

are brave, and know what to say to a woman, and the best I can say is this: come to me when the war is over and Texas is free with the same proposition you make now, and I will see what can be done. No more of this now. Do you like music?"

"When *you* play. In the after years the memory of this time will be sweet music to me."

"You know how to flatter, captain," she said. "I will play the fandango."

She loosened the small string, and began that delightful little melody to which the Spanish heart always responds, the "Spanish fandango," and as her white fingers glanced over the strings, and she bent over the instrument, the soldier felt that for such a woman as this a man might dare to die. Her dark eyes gleaming, the coral lips just parted enough to display her pearly teeth, and her lustrous hair dropping about her beautiful face, she was conscious of the ardent glance of her lover, and a bright flush stole up into her face, making it more beautiful.

"Sing to me," he said, "the old Spanish song you sung that night at the Marquis fandango."

She played a pretty prelude, and then sung an old Spanish air in a sweet, clear voice, which thrilled the lover's heart. He was bending over her, his lips close to hers, his eye looking down into the depths of her dark orbs, when a wild cry was heard without, and a single rifle spoke. Hurried steps sounded in the long corridors, and the señor dashed into the room, snatched down a pair of pistols from brackets above the fire-place, and called to the captain to follow.

"What is it?" cried Inez.

"Egerton!" was the reply.

Lennox darted out into the hall, and ran through it to the outer yard. The hacienda had been built for defense against the Indians, and in the inner side of the wall, at stated intervals, an opening had been left for musketry, with steps running up to it. The rangers had already occupied these, and were peering out at a strange scene in front. A large body of cavalry, dressed in a gaudy uniform, were sitting on their horses a hundred yards from the gate, bending forward to look at the hacienda. The first glance showed the captain that

those were a better class of men than the troops of Mexico generally. Three-fourths of them were renegades of all nations, English, German and French principally, and the balance made up of the picked men of the Mexican lancers. They were heavily armed ; and although called lancers, bore heavy sabers, cavalry-pistols and knives.

"Ha!" said the captain, as he peeped through a loop-hole
"This looks like business. Who fired that rifle?"

"I did," said Long Bill.

"What did you fire at?"

"Nothing, cap. I wanted to give you notice that the Phillistines war upon us, and I couldn't think of any better way."

"Do you know any of those fellows?"

"Yaas. Thar's three or four of 'em that ar' the pizenest critters you ever did see. One of 'em used to belong to the rangers, and got licked for stealing a hoss. I've got my eye on him, and if it comes to a fight, he goes down, sure."

"Hoi!" cried a commanding voice. "Open the gate."

CHAPTER IV.

MAD TOM EGERTON.

"YOU'D better open it, *señor*," said the man called Manuel, who had been cured in so miraculous a manner in the morning by La Vega.

"Do you want some more medicine, my dear fellow," said La Vega. "If you do—"

"Thanks," said Manuel, quickly. "I am not sick. Your medicine is too strong ; I do not like it."

"As you please," said La Vega. "You had better not show yourself, captain. Let me speak to those fellows myself."

He ran up the steps with all the agility and fire of youth, and sprung upon the wall. Two men were seated upon their horses just below him, pounding upon the gate with their pistol-butts and shouting. The first was the young fellow who

had been captured that afternoon by the captain of the second, the notorious guerrilla, Tom Egerton, better known as Mad Tom. A strange man he was, with his handsome face, long flowing hair, and beautiful eyes, to have earned so terrible a name as he bore. But, the beauty of this man was the mask which covered a soul fitted for black deeds. From the northern trails to the gulf, there did not roam a chief more feared and hated. Brave as a lion, desperate of fortune, caring for no crime, strange attributes for the same man to possess. He was strongly built and dressed like his companion, with the exception that he wore the epaulet of a Mexican colonel.

"What are you about?" cried young La Vega. "Why don't you open the gate?"

"What do *you* seek, sir?" said La Vega. "You are no longer my son, for I have disowned you, as I would my daughter if she were of your mind."

"Your son has come back to you to win back his heritage at the point of the sword," cried Mad Tom. "What do you mean, old man? Open your gates and let us pass in, for I swear to you if a shot is fired, or a hair of one of my comrades' heads is injured, I will build a fire which will light our way to Rio. I know you, old traitor; and it is only my regard for your gallant son which has saved you heretofore. Even now we will do you no harm if you surrender to us the man called Ralph Lennox, who claims to hold a commission from the traitor Houston."

"What do you want with him?"

"I will hang him to the highest tree on the prairie, as a warning to all traitors."

"And if he is not here?"

"He *is* here, and we know it. He captured my senior major, your son, this afternoon, and in a very unwise manner suffered him to go free."

"Do not call him my son," replied La Vega. "I tell you I have disowned him, and warn him never to come in my way, for he has done that which one of my blood ought to have scorned—betrayed a man who had spared him. Fall back from the gate and take him with you, for I will defend my house while a stone stands."

"Fire burn your heart!" screamed Mad Tom, shifting his

pistol so as to bring the stock into his hand and cocking it hastily. "I'll teach you a lesson."

But, Pedro La Vega was not yet so debased that he would suffer his commander to fire at his father, and he struck the pistol from his hand. It was well for Mad Tom that he did so, for Long Bill Epps was looking through the double sights at him, and was about to pull trigger when the pistol dropped.

La Vega disappeared from the wall, and the two men wheeled their horses and galloped back out of range, followed by their men. La Vega did not like to commence the attack, and not a shot was fired while the officers under Mad Tom held a consultation apart from the men. When it was over they dismounted, and a party began to cut down a small tree to batter down the gate, while others produced lariats, and hastily knotted them into the space between poles, making a rope-ladder, kept in its place by a single stick bound tightly to the top. These preparations showed that they meant business; and, when ready with six of these ladders, they began the advance, covered by a party of dismounted riflemen, ready to pick off any man who showed himself above the wall. But the precautions which the brave señor had taken in building the wall had made it a strong work, nor would Egerton have wasted his men in an assault upon it if he had known any thing about the picked riflemen within.

"They will have it," cried Lennox. "Begin the ball, boys."

The rifles began to crack along the wall, and long before the guerrillas reached the hacienda, several bodies cumbered the earth in front, for Long Bill and his companions were not the men to miss their aim. Crack! crack! crack! zip! zip! zip! The balls fell thick and fast among the ranks of the band. But they advanced boldly, and reached the wall. The Mexican adherents of La Vega, incited by the bold actions of the Americans, and threatened by their employer, had brought out their weapons and begun to use them with good effect. Surprised at the unexpected and desperate resistance, the guerrillas first wavered and then broke and fled, leaving their ladders behind them, in spite of oaths, curses and prayers on the part of their officers, followed by scattering shots from the rifle men, who cheered sarcastically.

"Well done, my brave boys," said the captain. "The rifles will bring Dimmick down upon them, and he will scatter them like chaff. How the dogs ran!"

"They ran like heroes," said a quiet voice close to his elbow. Lennox turned in surprise, and there, leaning against the wall and whittling a bit of pine with a small Bowie-knife, stood Guy Gaudelet, the Quadroon Spy. His clear, bright eye was fixed upon the captain, and a smile played about his lips.

"How came you here, Guy? How did you get in?"

"Ha! ha! captain. Why will you ask such questions, my friend? I come and go as I please and where I think I am needed. A spy must be ubiquitous to be successful, and he must not tell *how* he appears and disappears. What did I tell you about Mad Tom Egerton? You see he is here."

"Your information was exact, and I think we have succeeded in giving Master Tom a lesson. Confound it, man, why won't you tell me how you got in, when you know that I am puzzling my brains out to know how it is done. You ought to trust in me."

"Are we alone, captain?" said Guy, looking about him. "Bah! you know not what you ask me to do. You will not understand Guy Gaudelet fully until the Lone Star triumphs. When that time comes, you shall know me as I am. Let it suffice for you that I am your friend, and will do any thing for your sake. Hullo, Long Bill; have you recovered from the scare the jaguar gave you?"

"Oh, git out! Don't run on the old man now," said Long Bill. "See them greasers put out, Guy? They legged it, by mighty."

"You must prepare for a night assault," said Guy. "Mad Tom Egerton will not rest until he has taken the hacienda, after this unsuccessful assault. The question is, can you do any thing against them in the night?"

"We can try," said the captain. "I can trust my men, and they have actually stirred up the Mexicans to fight well. xonder band are not Mexicans."

"They are every nation under the sun," said Guy, "and the offscouring and scum of all—villains who have long ago earned a halter, but have not yet obtained their just deserts. I hope

we shall not have long to wait before each is exalted as he deserves."

"Exalted?"

"Hung," said Guy, briefly.

"Ah," said Lennox. "That sort of elevation might do for them. As for Egerton, is it not strange that a man with such a splendid physical frame should be so great a scoundrel? It has always seemed to me that one to whom God has given the glorious gifts of manly beauty and strength ought to be a good man as well. You seem at home in the hacienda."

"Rather," said Guy. "Do you know that I am afraid Egerton will get the better of us when darkness comes on. It will be so dark that we can not resist them successfully, and they will bear us down by sheer force of numbers. Well, let us not quarrel with fate. Perhaps it is the will of God that we should add to the number of martyrs Texas has given to the cause, but let us at least die so well that they may point to us in the after days as men who deserved well of their country."

"Noble young man," cried Lennox, seizing the hand of the spy. "Whatever may happen to me, I hope that you may be spared to Texas. I am but a fighting man, not a schemer, and your active brain will be of more service than my strong arms. There is one thing I would like to ask you, while we are on this subject. I believe you know some secret way out of the hacienda, by which you can guide the woman I love to safety. You know that Inez La Vega is in the building, and that she would sooner die than fall into the hands of Egerton. Promise me that, when the worst comes, you will guide her safely from this place."

"She will be saved if I am," replied Guy. "You have my promise. Would you like to see her?"

"Yes."

"I am the only one in the hacienda who can find her now, for I do know places of concealment in the building which are sealed even to her father. Go into the west parlor and wait for her. I will send her to you."

They entered the building together, and as the captain passed into the parlor Guy kept on down the hall. A quarter of an hour passed, when light steps were heard in the corridor and Inez came in, flushed and excited.

"Your men have done nobly," she said. "Oh, how delighted I was when the troop of Egerton were beaten back from the walls by the deadly rifles of the rangers! What will they do now?"

"They will wait until it is dark, and then make a new assault."

"Do you think you can beat them off again?"

"We can do our best. To gain the yard of the hacienda is not to gain the building itself. We will barricade the doors and windows, and fight from room to room and floor to floor, and make them win us ere they wear us."

Inez turned her head aside, and a beautiful expression came into her face as she murmured: "It is no shame to love a man like this; rather an honor and a glory." Then, turning to him, she held out both her hands and he kissed them over and over in a passionate way, while the rich color mounted higher into her lovely face.

"My darling, my darling," he said. "God is very good at least in giving me the treasure of your love. I shall deserve it better, as you shall see, and if I fall—"

"I will be your widow all my life, unless God will let me die with you, Ralph," she said. "What a strange thing is our courtship. You have seen me but twice before to-day, and you love me. I must believe you love me."

"When you have cause to doubt me I shall not wish for life," he said. "This wonderful young man, Gaudelet; what do you think of him?"

"A silly fellow, wonderful in nothing, strong only in his great love for Texas and his faith in you; for, believe me, Ralph, the boy loves you well."

"I hope so. But you do him wrong, my dear. For one so young he is one of the keenest and bravest. If you had seen him as I saw him, this morning, riding over a fierce jaguar to save the life of a rude borderman, you would not speak so slightingly of him. Besides, he has promised to save you if the enemy are too much for us, and you must go with him unhesitatingly when he calls you."

"Can you trust him?"

"With my life itself; you— There, Inez! It would be a joy to me if this interview could last forever, but there is work

to do. You must go back to your hiding-place. Where is Guy?"

"I will send him to you."

As she turned to go away a fierce tumult arose outside, and the crack of rifles, the yells of men in agony and a hundred savage sounds rose upon the still air of night.

"Away!" cried Ralph. "The assault is begun."

CHAPTER V.

THE PRISONER.

GRASPING his pistols he ran out into the court-yard. The men had not been idle since he left, and had set up four tripods, bearing upon the top a chaldron containing cotton soaked in tar and resin, all of which were blazing fiercely and casting a lurid light upon the scene. High above the din rose the shrill war-cry which Long Bill had learned from the Comanches, and his form was everywhere. Wherever the assailants put up a ladder there he was, hatchet in hand, to cut the bar which kept them asunder at the top, so that the pieces would fall together as soon as the weight of a man was thrown upon the ropes of which the bars were formed. He was wounded twice, though slightly, once in the head and once in the shoulder, and the blood was running down his face, but he paid no heed to it, and his shout cheered the men to new exertions. But the men who assailed them were no cowards, and fought desperately. The high walls were smoothly built; it was impossible to climb up, and the Mexicans within the wall, under the fear of the dreadful death La Vega assured them the guerrillas would deal them, actually fought nobly. Eger-ton saw that he was wasting his men to no purpose, and sounded his bugle to call them off.

"What next, I wonder?" said Long Bill. "Darn my hide, but ain't we the boys for a muss! I do declar' this suits me; it duz, by the mighty! If Dimmick don't come mighty soon he'll lose all the fun."

"They will come again," said Lennox. "Ha! what does this mean? Give it to them, boys, for the honor of Texas. I believe the fools are charging the hacienda on horseback."

It was even so. They came at a fierce gallop, riding up to the very wall on every side, while several saddles were emptied. To the surprise of the defenders, when they reached the wall every man sprung upright in the saddle, and seizing the top of the wall, began to climb. It was a desperate achievement, almost without a parallel, and so well was it carried out that it took the defenders by surprise.

"Let them have it, boys," cried Ralph. "As I live, I will kill that man with my own hand who turns his back. Up to the wall, and fight them hand-to-hand."

It was a strange and fearful scene which now commenced, under the light of the braziers. Upon the top of the wall scarcely three feet wide, men fought like demons with knife, hatchet and machete; some, locked in each other's embrace, fell from the wall to the ground, still grappling at each other's throats. Lennox singled out Egerton and they closed, and in a moment Ralph understood that he had to deal with a man possessed of great strength, though a trifle clumsy. Each held a Bowie-knife in his hand, and, grasping the other by the wrist, cut and thrust with wonderful skill and precision. In the knife exercise, however, there was not the equal of Ralph Lennox in the hacienda, and he had already wounded his adversary, when his foot slipped and he fell. The knife of Egerton gleamed in the air, and was about to fall, when a light figure bounded forward, a blow fell, and Tom Egerton dropped from the wall upon the hard earth inside the court-yard. The fall of their leader disconcerted the assailants, and they began to drop from the wall, one by one, until the defenders remained masters of the field.

But, at what a cost? Two of the rangers were killed outright, one was desperately wounded, and nearly all the rest were cut and bruised. They knew that, to withstand another assault of this kind was impossible. Ralph sprung to his feet and looked at his rescuer, and saw that it was the Quadroon Spy, who stood before him with a bloody hatchet in his hand, panting for breath, and with the perspiration starting in great drops from his flesh.

"Thank you, Guy," said Ralph, eagerly. "It was all up with me but for you. I think we had better take to the hacienda now."

"Yes. Secure Egerton first, and hold him as a hostage for the good conduct of his men, and then barricade the doors and windows. We will make a good fight yet."

"They sprung down from the wall, and set Señor La Vega at work with his Mexicans in making the barricades before the doors and windows, while they looked for Mad Tom. He was still senseless when they found him, but a dash of water in the face brought him to his senses, when he was seized by three of the rangers and tightly bound.

"Curse you, what do you want?" he said. "Let me go free or it will be the worse for you."

"Can't think of it, colonel," replied Ralph. "You are too strong in the arms, and might do some of us an injury if we tried that. Make yourself as contented as you can, for you are our prisoner, and we mean to keep you."

"It is well for you that this accursed boy stepped in between us," hissed the guerrilla. "In another moment you would have been in paradise or some worse place. Now listen to me: you set me at liberty and I'll agree to let you alone."

"Thank you," said Ralph.

"Do you agree?"

"No," drawled Ralph. "Don't see the utility, as the saying is. I think you had better make up your mind that you have come to *stay*. I don't mean to set you at liberty."

"My men will be in the hacienda in half an hour."

"I hope they won't," said Ralph, looking up to see how the work of making the hacienda secure was progressing.

"But they will. You can't stand another assault like that!"

"You think not? Well, perhaps we can't, but we will try. I did not speak of ourselves when I said I should be sorry. It was you I was thinking of."

"How can it affect me?"

"The moment your men force the outer door of the hacienda you will be shot," replied the captain. "Bill, how are they getting on?"

"Almost done, capt'in. Good-evenin', Mad Tom. How do you find yourself?"

"Go to the devil!" roared Mad Tom.

"Thank ye; I'd ruther not. Fact is, I ain't got time jest now, your fellers out thar keep us so all-fired busy. If they was to haul off, I dunno but I might oblige you. What do you say?"

"Am I to be insulted by this ruffian, Captain Lennox?" demanded the outlaw, angrily.

"Let him alone, Bill," said the captain. "Remember tha he is a prisoner, and, as such, can not resent any thing you may say or do. Take charge of him while I go to the wall."

Lennox climbed the wall, and shouted to the outlaws who were lurking about in the darkness, to send men to take away their dead and wounded, and they should not be harmed. Eight or ten men immediately appeared, and commenced carrying away the wounded, and burying the dead. Two or three who had fallen inside the wall, were passed out to their comrades. When this was done, Pedro La Vega advanced, and spoke to captain Lennox:

"We have all our missing men now except one man. Doubtless he is a prisoner, and as he is a fellow of no importance perhaps you would set him at liberty," he said.

"We have only one prisoner," replied the captain, "and we have kept him because he bears a very close resemblance to a noted chief known as Mad Tom. I think we shall be forced to hang him if you attack us again."

"He *does* bear a certain resemblance to Colonel Egerton," said Pedro, "but he is not the man you take him for."

"We shall hang him for the resemblance," said Lennox. "Nonsense, sir. I have half a dozen men here who know him well."

"Then this man, who so much resembles our colonel, is a prisoner?"

"He is."

"I demand his release."

"And I refuse to release him."

"You had better take care, sir. I have three hundred men with me, and they are not in good temper just now. In fact, if you refuse to give up the prisoner, I will not answer for the life of any man in the hacienda."

"You are not called upon to do so," replied Lennox, coolly

"But, understand that you endanger the life of your leader by any assault, for we are desperate men, and if we must die, will not leave Mad Tom to exult over us. I think you had better retire, for I do not see how you dare look your father or sister in the face."

"I care nothing for my father and sister. They have disowned me, and I will live to make them repent it. I am a man who has been true to my country, and they treat me like a dog. I know your hopes, too, vile Texan, and that you hope to lord it in my father's hacienda as the husband of Inez. I will kill her first with my own hand, for I have chosen another husband for her, and he alone she shall marry."

"You had better retire before I forget that you are her brother," cried Lennox, with a kindling eye. "I am not easily made angry, but if you incense me I will make you repent it. Go, while there is time."

Pedro La Vega strode away from the gate, closely followed by the men carrying away the last of the wounded. The fires in the braziers were replenished, and men were set to watch the slightest motion of the enemy, while the prisoner was led into the hacienda, and put into a little room by himself—a room with but one door and a small grated window. As soon as the footsteps of his captors had passed away, the prisoner leaned upon a chair and drew his boots off upon one of the rounds. His hands were securely bound, but he began to work them vigorously, trying to loosen the cords which bound them by the same trick which we have seen those cunning tricksters, the Davenport brothers, use. It requires only patience and endurance, and it is soon accomplished. He was soon able to slip one hand out of the cord, and, this done, the rest was easy, and he soon stood free upon the floor, and stepped lightly to the little window.

It looked into the court-yard, and he could see the defenders moving about, making their preparations for the final assault. He muttered a low curse, and opening his vest, he took out from an inner pocket a fine saw, and began to work upon one of the bars of the window, which were of fine hard wood. Now and then he spat upon the wood to deaden the sound, and worked away until he so weakened it as to be able to tear it from its socket with ease. This done, he put it back and

stole to the ~~door~~ There came no sound from the outside, and he waited for the assault from his men. He was too old a soldier to hazard an escape now, for he knew that in the confusion of the assault, he would have a far better chance. But, suppose they did not come? Of the officers left he knew that one was jealous of him, and would gladly have supplanted him in the band as commander. He waited anxiously, while the flames in the braziers flickered and burned high, throwing a lurid glare into the darkness, a hundred paces from the walls. Suddenly, without warning, there was a tramp of coming steeds, and the wild band again dashed up to the walls.

At the sound, instead of waiting to meet the shock of the assault, the defenders darted into the building and closed the only door not barricaded, and he could hear them hastily piling the heavy furniture against it.

"How those devils fight," he muttered. "There is nothing upon earth so desperately wicked in a fight as a Texan. I am afraid they will whip those blackguards of mine again if I am not with them. There they come, and woe to the defenders of the hacienda if they once break in, for they spare neither age nor sex!"

Many savage faces appeared upon the wall all about the hacienda, with their weapons poised ready for the assault. But they met no enemy, for they were safely housed behind the strong walls of the hacienda.

"But still, all deadly aimed and hot,
From every crevice comes the shot;
From every battered window pour,
The volleys of the sulphurous shower."

The guerrillas saw their danger, and darted close under the shelter of the walls, out of the reach of the missiles which were aimed at them. The colonel saw that it was time for him to act, and pulling out the bars from the window, he drew himself up to the ledge and kneeled upon it, looking downward. Five or six feet below, a ledge about eight inches wide ran round the building, and letting himself down carefully he stood upon it, holding on to the ledge of the window, and looked down to see how far he must drop. It was about ten feet from the ledge to the ground, and he determined to try it cost him what it might. He grasped the window-ledge

firmly, and turning a little, dropped to the earth, lighting with stunning force upon the head of a lurking guerrilla, who turned upon him with a savage curse and raised a knife above his breast, and was about to plunge it into him, when Egerton hissed out :

"Take care, you scoundrel. Don't you know me?"

"Mad Tom," muttered the fellow. "Excuse me, colonel. Let you pretty nigh broke my neck."

"I did not know any one was below me. Where is La Vega? Call him to me at once."

The man slipped away, still keeping close to the building, and returned in a moment with young La Vega."

"I hope you are satisfied, colonel," said the Mexican. "I warned you that you would not take the hacienda easily unless you surprised it. Who knows how many of these accursed Texans are within; perhaps fifty."

"I don't think so," said Egerton. "But, fifty or a hundred, my blood is up, and I will take the place or leave my bones below the wall. Is there any way of breaking in?"

"The walls are three feet thick, of solid masonry, and I suppose the doors are barricaded. The lower windows have iron bars three inches through."

"We can't burn it?"

"Not unless stone and iron will burn. I think we had better quit, for the men are getting demoralized by the resistance these fellows are making, and swear that they did not enlist to take strong places like this. It was all I could do to get them to make this last charge."

"Umph. Do the villains grumble?"

"Yes they do, and if I must tell you the truth, I can see no good in this. If the doors are beaten in and we take the place, I will not stand by and see you burn the house which must be mine in the end, when the Mexican armies are victorious in Texas. Let them rest; I have promised to aid you in carrying my sister, but, beyond that, I will do nothing."

"I do not intend to burn the house, you foolish fellow. If you should go under, it will be a part of my wife's portion, and I am not fool enough to burn my own property. What I want and what you want, is to hang that infernal Texan up for the buzzards to eat, and that I have sworn to do."

"I will not balk you in that design. But how are you to get in?"

"Leave that to me. There must be some way to break into this nest of traitors. Once in, death to every one except your father and sister. Do you agree to that?"

"As you like. Let me hear your plan, then."

While they whispered, the party inside were busy. Every article of furniture had been piled against the heavy doors, leaving small openings here and there for musketry. Ralph was everywhere, suggesting new means of strengthening the barricades, backed by the authority and good sense of La Vega. The windows were safe already, for no ordinary power could break down the strong bars which crossed them in both directions, bedded as they were into the solid stone masonry. Guy Gaudelet said but little, but wherever Ralph Lennox went he was sure to be, seeming to watch every movement. His fine eyes kindled as the work progressed, and Ralph looked at him admiringly.

"You take an interest in all this," he said. "But I forget. If we are taken, you, a known spy, will surely lose your life. Therefore, I beg of you as a friend, to seek this outlet of escape which is known to you, and make your way out of this and bring down the troop of Dimmick to our aid. I am afraid he has been put upon a false scent in some way by this acute villain, Egerton."

"It may be," said Guy. "But, am I sunk so low in your esteem, that you think I would desert you because danger is imminent? I had hoped you thought better of me than that."

"But Inez; think of her, my gallant friend. It is for her sake that I would have you go, not your own. As for your bravery, I do not doubt your possessing that, for you have proved it twice this day."

"Let Inez La Vega take her chance with the rest," said Guy, in a sad tone. "I do not believe she would go and leave her father and you in danger. Love; what is it? A phantasy, a dream, which should not enter into the thoughts of men in danger's hour. Rather nerve your arm to strike good blows for Texas, and we may yet beat off these marauders, or at least hold them at bay until the coming of Dimmick, who

will not move in the dark. Trust me, that gallant man will not forget us, and if they kill us, he will avenge us dearly upon the band of Egerton. Besides, your love must be a thing of quick growth, for, if Inez told me the truth, you have not seen her for six months, and then only at a ball."

"I am afraid you have little heart, Guy Gaudet," said Ralph, sharply, "if you doubt that I love Inez La Vega."

"Doubtless you think so," said Guy, coolly.

"Think so; you have never loved, or you would not say that to me."

A quick flush was perceptible under the dark skin of the quadroon, and he turned away his head.

"Have it so," he murmured. "Say that I do not know what love is. And yet, we of the hot, passionate blood of the South, ought to know the feeling as quickly as any."

"I believe you love *me*," replied Ralph; "and yet the feeling one man has for another is nothing to the love of man for woman."

"Yet I know I love you better than any woman could love you," said Guy. "You know it; you feel it, and I see by your face that you do not despise it. Whatever your danger, I will be near you and share it. In the thick of the battle, in sickness or at death's door, I will be true."

Ralph extended his hand, and the fiery boy met him half-way. At that moment there was a fearful crash, as the axes of the enemy fell upon the doors, and they knew that there was no time for idle words. Deeds must speak for them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH TORCH.

AT that terrible sound, the Mexicans turned pale and looked for some way of escape. But they were in the toils. Behind and before sounded the axes of the assailants, and a smile lighted up the face of Guy Gaudet.

"Did you ever read *Gil Blas*?" he said, looking at the shrinking wretches.

"Yes," said Ralph, wondering what he meant. "What of that?"

"Then here you have a practical exemplification of his saying in the robber's cave: 'Now behold the worthy nephew of my uncle, Gil Perez, caught like a rat in a trap.' We are the rats. Let us turn upon our enemies with sharp teeth. Hear me, Mexicans. You know your fate if we are taken, for I myself have heard Mad Tom say that he would not leave a man alive in the hacienda if he once broke in. You have wives and daughters, too. Be men and fight for your lives, and the honor of the women in your care. Load your rifles, rangers. This is the last desperate struggle, for if we beat them off now, they will retreat."

Crash after crash sounded, but, while the doors stood nothing could be done, for though a rifle-ball might penetrate the door, they knew that it would be so spent as to do little harm, and they could not afford to throw away a shot. In front of the main door knelt Long Bill and three of the remaining rangers, and behind them fifteen or twenty Mexicans. At the other door two rangers, and the remainder of the Mexicans, the last under the care of La Vega. Guy Gaudet and the captain stood in the midst of the hall, waiting for the crash, holding a pistol in each hand.

The blows fell like hail upon the doors, and they trembled and shook. With ax and bar and heavy clubs, the maddened guerrillas beat at the solid doors, until, at length, shattered and weak, they burst from their fastenings and fell with a crash, and showed the court-yard behind and before filled with the gory wretches, blaspheming heaven and earth because these determined men dared to stand up so long against them.

"Hurrah!" cried the bugle-like voice of the Quadroon Spy, as this sight was seen. "Fire!"

The rifles cracked and the heavy muskets of the Mexicans popped, and a lane seemed to be plowed through the midst of the enemy on either side, as the deadly shower passed through it. Then a desperate band of axmen assailed the barricades, striking mighty blows, under a terrible fire from the pistols of the defenders, who now rose to their feet, and, half-climbing the barricades, headed by Ralph Lennox upon one side, and by Señor La Vega upon the other, they fought

with desperate valor. Satisfied that only fighting could save them, the Mexicans, even to the "sick" man, Manuel, fought in a manner which did them credit, and for five minutes the strife was desperate. Shielded by the barricades, and knowing that the men of Egerton dare not fire at them for fear of doing injury to their comrades, the assailed party could expose their bodies more freely than the others. Twice Ralph Lennox turned aside a blow directed at the bosom of the spy, who was fighting gallantly beside him, and as often Guy had done him the same service, and the enemy had made but little advance, when, to the utter surprise of the defenders, a wild shout was heard above them, and there appeared at the head of the stairs Mad Tom Egerton, heading a strong party of his men. La Vega saw them, and, throwing open a heavy door leading out of the great hall, he pointed the way to the Mexicans, who dashed in, followed by the rangers, who did not draw back except at the command of the captain. The only man who remained was Long Long Bill Epps, who took his station coolly in the center of the hall by the side of La Vega, the captain, and Gaudet.

"Away with you," cried La Vega. "Follow those men and save them, as you know how. We will not be far behind you."

"Let Captain Lennox order me to go and I will do it," replied the young spy, sullenly. "Otherwise I will not go."

"Go," said Lennox. "I order you."

Guy turned and darted down the stairway, and a door closed behind him. The three desperate men who had volunteered as rear-guard followed, just as the enemy came swarming over the barricade and down the stairs. When they reached the door they found themselves upon the wrong side of a strong oaken door.

"Bring axes," roared Mad Tom. "Down with it at once."

"Stand out of the way," cried a burly Englishman. "I'll answer for that door."

They stood aside, and the giant raised his ax and darted it at the lock. The rattle of metal told that the blow had succeeded, and he struck again. The door flew open and showed a flight of steps leading downward. Mad Tom led the way, carrying in his hand a blazing torch, closely followed by four

or five of the most desperate of his gang. They were now traversing a hard stone floor, through a lofty arched passage, and as they pushed open a door and thronged into a large vault, the foremost paused and made a terrified motion to retreat. Why did they pause? There, not fifteen feet away, seated upon a keg of powder, and the fragments of broken staves mixed with a mass of powder under his feet, sat Guy Gaudet, with a blazing link in a broad tin dish in his hand.

"Stop," he cried, in a voice like the blast of a bugle. "One step further, raise a hand to draw a weapon, and you are in eternity."

"Fool!" hissed Egerton. "Would you destroy yourself?"

"Yes," replied the young man, promptly. "This is no time for idle words. I and my companions are ready and willing to die if we can, at the same time, send you to eternity. Your crimes are rank in the sight of heaven. Do not think that, by killing me, you can save yourselves, for in the next room sits Captain Lennox upon the same sort of a throne as this I occupy, and my death will be his signal to send you to your doom."

"My dear fellow—"

"Do not be affectionate, I beg of you," said the spy. "I do not appreciate it."

"Let us reason the matter. I grant you have it in your power to send us all to eternity; what could you gain by it?"

"Revenge is sweet, they say, and we could rid Texas of some of her most bitter enemies. We could teach Mexico that those who fight the battles of liberty count that death glorious which is earned in the good cause. You, in your lust for gold and military glory, know nothing of this feeling. It is for us to teach you, and we will do it."

"What do you demand?"

"I make no demand. I simply say that if a single one of your vile band has his foot upon these floors in five minutes, I will throw this link into the powder, and then good-bye to Egerton and his band."

"Your demand is a hard one," muttered Egerton, as the spy took out a watch and laid it on his knee, looking fixedly at the dial. The ruffians behind began to crowd back quickly and rush up the stairs. Egerton looked behind him and s

that he was alone in the room with the spy, deserted by his men. With a bitter curse he turned upon his heel and darted up the stairway and out into the open air. His men were already in the saddle and out of the limits of the hacienda, looking back with terrified glances at the grim old walls. The gloomy face of the colonel grew darker as he saw them.

"Curse you, cowards! Would you leave me alone? I, who taught you how to take the hacienda, who led you through the window from which I made my escape, and took these desperate men behind?"

"You didn't take the hacienda," growled the burly ruffian who had battered down the door which led to the vault. "Now look here, colonel: We'll follow you in any fight you choose to take us into where the chances are even; but, hang me if I'll go after you to the devil the way you wanted us to to-night. That young heathen would think no more of blowing us up to the sky than I would think of taking a chaw of tobacco, he wouldn't. What have we gained to-night? We've lost twenty good men, and we ain't got a thing to show for it."

"At least let us go back and take all we can find in the upper part of the house."

"I'm afraid of that little devil sitting on the powder."

"You need not be. He won't destroy himself and the rest to save the property, you may depend upon it. Come; who'll volunteer to go with me into the house to see what we can find?"

No one spoke.

"Very well. Then I'll go myself. And if I risk my life in this work, none of you need expect me to share with you, for I won't do it."

He went back into the hacienda, and a blank stare ran through the band. They loved plunder, and it galled them to the soul to think that Egerton should have it all to himself. Two or three of the more daring leaped out of their saddles and ran after him, and he was hardly inside when twenty men were at his heels wandering through the rooms, stealing by line and level. One rich article after another disappeared in their capacious pockets. Bureaus were broken open, chests ransacked and gold and jewels secured, and their enemies below stairs had made no sign. The outlaws ranged at will through the building

and growing bold by degrees, began to sing and dance when a clear, sweet voice called to the colonel:

"I give you this one chance for your life, villain that you are. Leave this place at once, or I swear to keep my word. Eyes are watching you that you can not see, and if we weighed the property you are stealing as heavily as you do, you would be doomed. Go, while there is time, or I will drop the light into the powder and offer a grand oblation to the *manes* of murdered Texans."

They waited for nothing more, but darted from the house at once, and reached their saddles. Egerton saw that nothing was to be gained by remaining, and dashed away to the north, leaving the conquerors the field. They came up out of the vaults with joy at their unexpected deliverance imprinted upon every face, but their looks changed when they saw the ruin which had been wrought. The piano of Inez lay battered out of shape, overturned upon the floor. The strings of her harp had been severed by a cut from a machete, and her favorite dog lay dead upon the threshold. La Vega looked at the ruin with set teeth and quivering lip, moving like a man in a dream.

He saw the articles of taste and *vertu* which he had gathered through the years of a long life, in fragments at his feet. As he looked sadly upon the ruins, a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and he turned. Guy Gaudet was standing there, with a smile upon his lip, although it trembled.

"You are sad, señor," he said. "This desolation goes to your heart as it does to mine. What of that? It is written, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation.' Be proud that you have been chosen as the mark for the enemies of Texas, for, in the day when we are free, you will think of this hour with delight."

"You say this—you?"

"Yes. I am proud to see that the hand of crime has been laid upon your house, for one day you may lay your hand upon your heart and say: 'I was true to Texas in her hour of trial.' We have much to be thankful for, more than you think. Why, but for that friendly powder, what would have been our fate? We have escaped with honor, and the house of La Vega yet stands, though its household gods are

shattered. Captain Lennox, I must bid you good-by. I ride forth to hunt Tom Egerton to his haunt in the woods, and, once found, I will lead Ned Dimmick to it. Give Long Bill a horse, and let him ride to Dimmick's camp. Tell him to bring down the band at once and wait for me by the three trees upon the river, where I will come before two days, or never. Do not wait."

"I think I will ride out myself. Dimmick will expect me."

"Very well. Do you go at once?"

"In a few moments."

"You wish to see Inez first," said the spy, with a smile. "Is it not so?"

The soldier blushed, and the spy laughed aloud. "He can not forget, in the moment of victory, that he is in love with your daughter, señor," he said. "Bah! it is all the same. I am going out by the way I came in, and will try to prevail upon her to see you, though I doubt she likes me better than she does you."

"Sir!"

"Look at that! The captain is ready to quarrel with me in a moment. I am sure the Señora La Vega has known me longer than she has you, and I think I have found favor in her eyes. Don't get angry, captain; can you not take a joke? I'm off now. Good-by, boys. If I don't come back, Dimmick's Rangers will think kindly of me, I know."

"You'd better take me with you," said Long Bill, with a snuffle. "Thar ain't a man here, though I do say it, that knows the chapparal better than I do."

"I'd take you if I could consent to have any one, Bill" said Gaudelet, kindly. "You must not be angry with me, captain. I am starting upon an expedition of some danger and may not return."

"Don't say that," said La Vega, in a stifled voice, without looking up. "God is too good to suffer you to fall."

"I am in God's hands," replied the spy, raising his eyes to heaven, a beautiful look of resignation stealing over his fine face. "And, as you say, God will not let the weakest of his creatures fall to the ground without his notice. He, whose unworthy servant I am, will shield me in the hour of danger."

if it is His will, and if not, He will forgive my wickedness on earth, and take me to His rest."

"My brave friend," said Lennox, "I hope I am too much a man to be annoyed by your innocent joke at my expense. I could not resign Inez to any man easily, but to no man more readily than to yourself."

"You do yourself wrong," said the spy. "Inez La Vega never gives her faith but once, and then she is unchangeable. Good-by, all, until we meet again. Come with me, captain."

He led the way down the stairs, past the heap of powder upon which the spy had sat, with the means of annihilation in his hand, and into another room, where more powder was heaped upon the floor. Touching a spring in the wall, he flung open a secret door and passed into a small, arched room.

"Here I bid you good-by," said the quadroon. "For the present, you must know no more of the secrets of this place, but perhaps Inez will explain them. Let me take your hand before I go, and bless you for the love you have shown to one who has in his veins the blood of an abject and enslaved race. There; let me go."

He opened another door at the back of the room, and was gone. Lennox waited in breathless expectation for a few moments, when the door was again thrown open, and Inez was in his arms.

CHAPTER VII.

A GOOD BLOW WITH A BAD RESULT.

LOVERS' partings are sad, and we will not linger on them. Inez wrung from him a promise to seek her no more unless she sent for him, until Texas was free. It was a hard thing to do, but he was certain of her love, and that was a sweet consolation. When they parted it was early morning, and, as he rode away, he turned to look at the brave old house they had defended, with something of the feeling a child has for a father.

The remnant of the rangers rode on at a brisk pace through the gathering light, when they saw a horseman crossing the country toward them at a racing pace, taking the gullies and brooks flying. As he neared them, the rangers halted, and half-drawing a pistol, Ralph rose in his stirrups to look just as the horseman cleared a low growth of mesquit-bushes, and they saw that it was the spy.

"Come with me!" he cried. "No words, but ride for life and death."

"Hurrah!" cried the rangers. "Go it, little Guy."

Gaudet turned his horse and cleared the bushes again, followed by the men, who, notwithstanding the terrible night they had passed, were still eager for battle. Away they went, stopping at nothing, riding as only Texans can ride, and still keeping their weapons ready, trusting to Guy to teach them where to use them. On, on, the wind singing past their ears, the mustangs bounding to the touch of the spur. They were seven with the spy, for four of the men had been left *hors de combat* at the hacienda, three of whom would never again draw knife or aim rifle in the cause of the Lone Star.

Before them lay a chapparal, deep and dense, with a broad path broken through it. At the edge of this chapparal Guy dismounted, fastened his horse to a bush, and signaled to the others to follow his example.

"Get your pistols and knives," he whispered. "I don't think we shall have much trouble, but it is well to be prepared. Come on."

He struck into the beaten path on a run, followed by the rangers. A hundred yards from the edge of the chapparal they came suddenly upon a clearing, in the midst of which a horrible tableau was being enacted. Half a dozen men were grouped about a tree, and in the midst, with bound hands and a rope about his neck, stood one of Dimmick's rangers. They were about to hang him, but he looked about with an undaunted eye.

"What do you think now, you bloody Yankee?" cried one of the men. "You are going to be hung up, you understand; hung like a dog."

"I'm in better trim to die than you are," replied the ranger. "I can say that I never wronged man or woman if my

time, and if that won't let a man out, then nothing ever will. Bah! why don't you string me up, you mongrels, unless some one of you is Christian enough to shoot me. That's a *man's* death."

"Run him up," cried the man who seemed to have command of the party. "Egerton won't be pleased if we dally too long here, for he's got work cut out for us."

At this moment came the charging cheer of the rangers, who broke like a whirlwind into the astonished party. Two went down at the first fire, and the rest turned at bay like dying panthers, and fought like demons. But they were overpowered, and all but the two who fell first were taken prisoners. The captive, who had been in such deadly danger, greeted his friends with a cheerful laugh.

"That was clever of you, boys," he said. "I thought I had my gruel."

"Mount and away," cried Guy. "Take your prisoners with you and go! No time is to be lost, for Egerton is not far away."

They left the *chapparal*, some of the men leading the horses of the captives, and regained their own steeds. The prisoners were tied to their horses, and with the hand of a ranger on each bridle, the disengaged hand holding a pistol, while the horses were guided by the knees and voice, they rode away.

"Faster, faster," said Guy. "I tell you that Egerton is not far away. Ha! Do you see that? Let your prisoners go, and ride for your lives."

They had good need. From every direction they could see men spurring at them in the calm gray of the morning, whom they recognized as the band of Egerton. They could no longer hold the prisoners, that was plainly to be seen, but they hated to give them up.

"Let them go!" cried Lennox. "Now, boys, follow me."

From three different points the guerrillas were converging upon them, thirsting for their blood. They rushed on, hoping to get out of the cordon of their enemies before they could close upon them, and began to hope, when they saw, just in front, fifteen or twenty of the enemy gathering to impede their further progress. It was a desperate moment,

one to try the stoutest heart. Not a word was spoken, but by an involuntary impulse, they drew knife and pistol, though never checking their onward course. Their only hope was to break up the force of the enemy in front before the enemy behind could reach them. It was a glorious sight to see these gallant men rushing on to battle, strong in the justice of their cause, and determined to sell their lives dearly. The enemy were nearly three to one, but the Texans never thought of that. Three abreast they rode at the astonished troop of lancers, with Lennox and the quadroon in the center, the eyes of the brave boy blazing with the light of battle.

"Hurrah!"

Down went horse and man before their headlong charge, rolling in the dust before the feet of the rangers. Vain was the valor bought by money and the desire for plunder, against the strong arms of the patriotic rangers. They burst through their foes like a whirlwind, but one man, before he fell, fired a pistol at Lennox, and he dropped from his saddle. In the wild fury of the charge, his comrades did not miss him, but scarcely had they gone a hundred yards, when Guy cried out:

"The captain; Ralph!"

Each man half-wheeled in his saddle and looked back. The enemy were all about the captain and were raising him to his feet.

"Come back," cried Guy. "Cowards, do not leave your captain alone with these traitors. I will lead you—I! Do you fear to follow?"

"It won't do," said Long Bill Epps, seizing his bridle. "I ain't a coward, neither, and I tell you it won't do. Why? 'cause seven men ain't got no show ag'in' two hundred or more. Come, my boy, we love you and we love the captain. Thar ain't a man here that wouldn't do any thing to save him, but thar ain't any thing to be done. See; they're all on hand, and we've a hard run for our lives. Stick in yer spurs and away, lads, and the devil take the hindmost."

They rode in this way for half an hour, until the sound of pursuit died away behind them, and then Long Bill called a halt. Guy appeared to be overpowered by the calamity which had so suddenly befallen them. His head dropped upon his horse's neck, and he seemed in a stupor.

"Come, come, lad," said Bill, touching him on the shoulder. "Don't take it to heart so much. I know you loved the captain, and he was a gallant man, but he's only one, and there are many more to fight the battles of Texas."

"I know it, Bill; I know it. Let me beg your pardon, boys, for what I said in the heat of passion. I called you cowards, as I blush to own, because you would not throw away lives which have been given to Texas. I am going about my duty, in the execution of which I was stopped by the desire to save Washburn."

"Why the devil didn't you let the dogs hang me?" said Washburn. "An old kiln-dried ranger like me is just as well out of the way, you see. If I hadn't been in the way, the captain would have been all right now. I'm always blundering, you know."

"You won't be rash, Guy," said Long Bill. "Promise me that."

"I am never rash," said Guy, waving his hand. "Farewell now, for I will save Captain Lennox or die with him. I brought him into this trouble. Ride with whip and spur until you find Dimmick and bring him down here."

With these words he touched his horse and bounded away. They could see that he did not take the same path they had lately traversed, but a line which, if followed, would bring him to the hillocks on the right of the position occupied by Egerton's men.

"Let the boy go," muttered Bill. "He's got a good heart, has little Guy, and I like him well. Come, boys; give it to your cattle and let's be away. Thar's work afore us."

Egerton was among the first who reached the side of Lennox. He uttered a cry of joy as he saw who the prisoner was.

"By ——" he cried, "I'd give a thousand dollars for the other one, that I might hang them up together."

"What other, colonel?" said one of the men, eagerly.

"Guy Gaudelet."

"Do you mean that for honest? If I bring you news of his death, would it be worth a thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"singular. I shouldn't wonder if I was to bring you the

news myself. Howsoever, I'll try. What are you going to do with this beauty?"

Looking closely at the prisoner, the colonel saw that he was faint from loss of blood, and sprung from his saddle, calling to a man who acted as surgeon of the band. They laid the captain upon the ground after they had taken off his coat, and cut open his shirt. The wound was upon his left side, and although he had bled freely, it was not by any means a bad hurt, for the bullet had glanced upon his ribs. The surgeon dressed it with ease and skill; then they lifted him and aided him to put on his coat.

"I must be mistaken in you, Colonel Egerton," said Lennox, "else why have you taken this pains with a prisoner."

"You think it is done in mercy," said Egerton, with a bitter laugh. "That is the place wherein the mistake lies. I propose to hang you, sir, but not until I can hang you *vis-à-vis* with that young scoundrel whom you call Guy Gaudet."

"You will wait for that?"

"I promise you that you shall not hang except in his company."

"Thanks. Then I have a long lease of life. The noble young man of whom you speak, is under the protection of a better than earthly power, and I believe that he will never fall into your hands."

"I will shake your belief."

"Perhaps. But I doubt it."

"You broke in upon a party of my men just now and rescued a prisoner. How dared you do that?"

"It is a part of my business, you must understand."

"You shall pay dearly for it. Is Velasquez dead, La Vega?"

"Yes," replied that officer, coming up hastily at the word.

"Ah; then he has no occasion for his horse. You will give it to Captain Lennox, who designs to pay us a visit in our camp."

A fiery mustang, which had been ridden by a man cut down by Ralph in the charge, was brought up, and their prisoner mounted with difficulty. His feet were fastened together by a lariat passed under his horse, in such a way that he could not possibly dismount unless the rope were cut or untied. The

rest of the party mounted, taking their dead with them, and rode away at a brisk trot. The pace they went was an agony to Lennox, whose wound was very painful, but he set his teeth and bore it.

"Who told you that my men were hanging that scoundrel, Washburn?" demanded the chief.

"No matter," replied Lennox. "It is enough that I found out."

"I have to thank him, for the exchange was a good one. Washburn was only good for hanging purposes and you will do to keep. By the way—where did you hide Inez La Vega last night?"

"I refuse to tell."

"It makes no difference. Do you know that I propose to marry that young lady?"

"I have no doubt you may be impudent enough to *propose* it," replied the ranger.

"Pedro."

The younger La Vega came to his call, and they conversed in low tones as they rode on side by side. Their course led them through a broken country, cut up by gullies and dense chapparal, the intricacies of which seemed familiar to them, for they rode on at a rapid pace. Lennox, half against reason, hoped that Dimmick would follow and assail the band and set him at liberty. He did not like the aspect of affairs, for he knew that these desperate scoundrels counted human life as nothing if it stood in their way.

They halted after a two hours' ride upon a level plain, having just crossed a deep though narrow gully. Upon the right was a mass of broken rocks, which seemed to have been tumbled about by the hands of some giants at play. A wild shout startled them, and a boy in a fantastic dress came bounding down the rocks toward them—a strange boy, with wild eyes and long, tangled masses of dark hair, in which he had thrust heron feathers. His face was dirty and smeared with paint here and there, and his hands looked as though they had not seen water for many a day.

"It is Mad Julian," said Pedro. "What does the fool want now?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" piped the new-comer, in a shrill voice

"Here they come home from the war, and some of them have bloody noses and cracked heads. Good-morning, noble colonel. You told me when you went away that you would bring back a lovely bride. Where is she?"

"Get out of the way, fool," roared Egerton. "Somebody take a lariat and lay it over that fool's shoulder with a heavy hand."

"Remember that he is a privileged character," said the younger La Vega. "Do him no harm. Stand aside, Julian, and let us pass."

"Ah, see the gentleman there. Ha! ha! ha! Is that the way you ride? Can't you sit in a saddle without a rope on your feet? Why, I am a fool, but I can do better than that."

He pointed to Lennox, and fell into convulsions of laughter, in the midst of which one of the men pushed him back, and the colonel took off his red scarf and approached the prisoner.

"You must be blindfolded," said he. "Bend your head."

Captain Ralph obeyed without a word, and the scarf was wrapped about his eyes. This done, they again moved on, and the prisoner could hear the foolish boy shouting as he followed, his laughter being directed at him because his eyes were covered. In this way they passed on for an hour, until he could feel that they had entered the shadow of a dark wood, while the wild shouts of the idiot boy still rung in his ears.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WHISPERED WORD.

"HALT!" cried the commander. "Remove the bandage from the eyes of the prisoner."

The scarf was removed, and the captain looked about him. They were in an opening in the wood, containing several acres, in the center of which a number of small buildings had been set up, forming a miniature village. A number of women, in gay dresses, were hurrying out to greet the returning band. A moment will explain this phenomenon. Before the war in Texas, and in fact during the entire history of Mexico, predi-

tory bands had made their haunts in the mountains and laid the country under contributions whenever they thought proper. Most of the brigands had wives, who lived in their secret haunts, and the men of Egerton had not been blameless citizens before the Texan war, when they were known far and near as among the most important of the guerrilla bands. The women were for the most part Mexican, and they now ran in among the men, each greeting her spouse warmly. But some looked once and went back weeping and desolate, for they knew that the man who had gone forth in the pride of strength the day before would never come back to them. These poor women, though of low estate, felt the desolation as strongly as if they had been of better birth. Egerton listened coldly to their wailing, for he knew that they would blame him for forcing the attack upon the hacienda.

"A curse upon it," he muttered. "Cara, where is Juanetta?"

"She is here," said a sweet voice. "Have you returned, my chief? I am glad you are safe. It seems that you have lost some men."

Egerton turned quickly and faced the speaker, a beautiful girl in a picturesque garb, who had come up quietly. She wore her hair loose, and it fell in thick masses almost to her waist. She wore an underskirt of red, and above it a sort of jacket of blue velvet, slashed and braided with gold cord. A red belt encircled her slender waist, in which was thrust a pair of silver-mounted pistols and a stiletto.

"Ah, Juanetta, you are here. Yes, I have lost some men, but I have taken the man who is the cause of it."

The eyes of Juanetta wandered for a moment over the form of the prisoner with an indifferent air.

"He is handsome," she said. "These Texans are strong men, and likely to suit the eye of a maiden. Will you come into the house?"

"In a moment. Go in yourself and wait for me. As soon as I have attended to my prisoner I will come to you."

Juanetta glided away, and the chief came forward and cut the cords upon the limbs of the prisoner and helped him to dismount. In the center of the village was a cabin somewhat stronger than the rest, into which Egerton led Ralph, and showed him into a strong room with heavy bolts upon the outside

of the door. There was no window in this room, and the only way in which light and air could enter was through a small opening over the door. A rude bed occupied one corner and a rough table another, with a wooden stool.

"This will be your residence for the present, captain," said the chief. "Please make yourself at home, while I hit upon some plan to find your companion in misery, our friend Gaudet. I am a man of my word, and I swear that you will not hang except in his company."

"Thanks again," said the captain, and the guerrilla went out, with a loud laugh, closing the door behind him and thrusting the bolts into their places. He crossed the village to a building more pretentious than the rest and threw open the door. Juanetta was seated upon a couch near the window, touching the strings of a guitar lightly. She sprung up at his entrance and threw herself into his arms.

"*Mio carissima*," he said, tenderly. "How have you been since my absence?"

"I have waited for you anxiously," she said, with her head upon his shoulder. "How could I help it when I know how brave my hero is, and that he never shrinks from danger?"

"Bah, Juanetta. Enough of that for the present, and let us speak of better things. The sight of your face is always enough to raise me out of my most gloomy moods, for I believe, poor child, that you love me."

"I do indeed. When you doubt that, I shall die, and when I doubt you—" She made a sudden pause.

"What will you do then?" he said.

"I shall kill you and *her*," she cried, her hot Southern blood flashing up into her face.

"Her?" he said, with a slight feeling of shame. "To whom do you refer?"

"To any one who is cruel enough to win your love from me. Listen to me, my chief. I am in one of my strange moods now, and I will not be balked. Hear what I have to say, and after that chide me if you will. You know that I love you dearly, and upon your love I have built up all my hopes of happiness. Beware that you never give me cause to hate you, for the vengeance of one of my race is something too terrible to think of."

"You are in a strange mood, my darling," he said, drawing her to a seat beside him upon the couch. "Have I given you any reason to think badly of me?"

"No; I believe you love me still, my hero. But, it is not that I fear. You are a man to whom wealth and power are foremost; love is secondary. To me, love is first of all, supreme. You understand me, then, when I say that when I lose your love, I lose all."

"You have not lost it," he said, kissing her. "I shall never love another woman as I love you."

"I do not think you will. But you may find one who can raise you higher in wealth and power than you now are, and beware that the thought does not tempt you to do me a wrong."

"Who has put this into your head?" said Egerton, turning away his face, that she might not see the confusion written upon it. "When we are married you will forget it all."

"When we are married; yes. That alone would set me at rest. Oh, Egerton, I have nothing to bring you but a pure heart and a whole soul. Let this content you, and do not leave me for any other woman. There; my mood is passed. Kiss me, and let us talk of something else. Where have you been since you left?"

"I have made an assault upon the hacienda La Vega."

"Unsuccessful?"

"Yes. They had received an unexpected reënforcement from Dimmick's rangers, who fought like demons, and though we brought away much wealth we lost a number of men."

"I have heard that Inez La Vega is beautiful."

"She is," replied the colonel. "At least, so report says."

She looked at him keenly, but his face did not change.

"Did you see her?" she said.

"No; she kept out of sight. I will explain it to you, and you will understand how it is that we got the gold and jewels and not the hacienda itself."

He gave her a rapid account of the night's work at the hacienda, saying as little as possible of Inez, and then only in answer to her questions.

"Perhaps this Captain Lennox loves the Señora Inez?"

"He does; my curse upon him!"

"What is it to you?" she said, her color rising

He saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to gloss it over.

"Nothing to me, of course, except that it makes me angry to think that this vile Texan should aspire so high. Have you any thing to eat? I am very hungry."

She set food upon a little table, with a bottle of wine and glasses, and sat down with him, although she ate nothing, and drank but a single glass of wine. Who was this strange girl, so beautiful and young, and how had she found a home among banditti? It was one of those strange chances so often happening in a distracted country like Mexico, which had thrown her into their midst when a child. Her father, a political refugee, had been chief of the band, and when he died, for a time she kept them together and was the guiding power. When Egerton came, little by little she delegated her authority to him, until she no longer sought to control the band, trusting to his military knowledge. They lived in the same house, ate at the same table, and shared the money which by right came to the chief of the band, and it was an understood thing that Juanetta was to be the wife of their leader. Thus matters had gone on for two years, until the coming of Pedro La Vega, who had shot a man in a street brawl at Austin and escaped to them. He had talked continually of his beautiful sister and the wealth she would have, and though Colonel Egerton was not dazzled by the beauty, the wealth found favor in his eyes, and he began to think he might do better than marry Juanetta. Yet he loved her as well as it was in his nature to love, and had told the truth when he said that no other woman could take her place in his heart. At times he thought to give up the pursuit of Inez, marry this girl who loved him, accept his rank in the Mexican army, and forget his life of crime. These were the times when his better angel was working at his heart, but he expected soon to hear the flutter of the departing wings. His chief study now was to keep the secret of his plans from Juanetta, and in case he could not, how to break it to her without rousing her hot Spanish blood to fury. So he ate tortillas and supped his wine, looking at her furtively, while she studied him as well.

"What do you propose to do with this prisoner?" she asked.

"I intend to hang him."

"You surely do not mean that."

"Why not? Is it any thing new?"

"It is time that this combat, which has assumed the rank of a revolution, should be less sanguinary. Treat this man, who is a gentleman, as a prisoner of war."

"You ask too much," he said, with one of his dark looks.

He and I have a quarrel which can only be settled by his death."

At this moment, a wild, musical voice was heard singing outside; the door was pushed open and the idiot came in, waving his arms above his head and singing snatches of old songs.

"What do you want here?" demanded the colonel. "Get out."

"Do not be harsh with the poor boy," said Juanetta. "Remember what he is. His story is very sad."

"I have never heard it. Will you sing us a song, boy?"

"No," replied the idiot. "I will not sing to you, but I will sing to the lady. She is beautiful; her eyes are like stars, and her voice is as sweet as running water. Ah, that is a guitar."

He snatched at the instrument, and striking a prelude, began to sing a song which was evidently improvised. It had little merit as a poetical production, but it was the sweet voice, and the rich, full emphasis laid upon every note, which told the story:

They bid me rest, but my poor heart
Had not the power to sleep:
They bid me rest, but 'tis my part
A constant watch to keep

Oh, once I roamed in the forest free,
A blithe and happy boy,
But the spoiler came in a single night
And banished all my joy.

Oh, give me back the olden hours,
Remove my heavy care!
And then at last above the stars
A shining crown I'll wear.

There was a touching pathos in this rude song which

reached even the hard heart of Egerton, and the tears came into the eyes of Juanetta.

"Come here my poor boy," she said.

He came and kneeled at her feet.

"Why do you sing such sad songs?" she asked. "You are very unhappy, I know, but perhaps your life will not always be so hard."

His sad fit had passed away, and she could see his eyes, which were really beautiful, sparkle with delight.

"I knew it, I knew it," he said. "I told them that you had not a hard heart, and would feel for the sorrows of the poor and weak. Why do you live in the woods, and why do you love this dark man, Egerton? He has a beautiful face, but a black heart."

"Silence!" cried Juanetta, fiercely. "Little wretch, do you know to whom you speak? I will have you whipped to death if you speak in that way of him."

The boy put his hand to his forehead in a confused way. "It changes, it changes," he muttered. "A moment ago she was kind, and now she is savage to me. I am afraid of you, and I will go away and never see you again."

"It will be better for you," said Juanetta, her eyes flaming with passion. "What are you thinking of? Do you know that Thomas Egerton is to be my husband?"

"I am sorry," he said, sadly. "I will not say it again. Put your hand upon my forehead and be kind again, for you make my head ache when you talk in that way."

"I am going out, Juanetta," said the colonel, rising. "Keep the boy with you, for he may serve to amuse you."

He passed out, and left the boy sitting on the ground and muttering to himself. The moment the colonel was gone the boy sprung up and came nearer the woman who loved the man who had just gone out.

"You love him?" he said, in a quick, questioning tone. "I did not know it when I spoke. Do you know that he has seen another woman whose money is brighter in his eyes than your face?"

Juanetta half drew the stiletto from its sheath and looked at him with flaming eyes. Then she remembered who he was and her hand dropped again.

"What do you mean?"

"They say I am mad, but I can see and hear. Why did the colonel go to the hacienda La Vega? Because Pedro La Vega talked so much of his sister's wealth, and the power a man could have as her husband. I heard them talk and they didn't mind me, because I was a fool, they thought."

Juanetta had fallen back upon the couch, with her hand pressed upon her heart, and her face livid.

"Stop," she said. "Do you tell me that Inez La Vega loves this man, to whom I have given my faith, well enough to marry him?"

"No," replied the boy. He did not look like an idiot now. Supreme daring and cunning flashed from his dark eyes.

"Boy," cried Juanetta, "you are not what you seem. Who are you?"

"I thought you knew. I'm a poor—fool," replied he, relapsing into the old mood.

"No. Now I look at you, we are deceived. But this shall not suffice. Either tell me who you are, or I shall raise an alarm."

"You really want my name?" said the boy, with his back against the door.

"I will have it."

"Come here, and I will whisper it, for I will not have the walls hear."

Juanetta bent her head, and the idiot whispered a single word. She recoiled from him in utter surprise, with doubt and anger plainly written on her face.

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN'S REVENGE.

"**You!**" she hissed. "Impossible!"

"You think so, yet it is true. Now that you know that I am a counterfeit, what do you propose to do?"

"I am going to give the alarm, and have you taken as a spy. I know you now, young villain. Your disguise is useless. You are Guy Gaudet, the Quadroon Spy!"

"Precisely," replied the *soi-disant* idiot; "that particular person and no other. But you were wrong when you said you would give the alarm and have me taken. Listen to reason. I am not here to do you or your lover any harm, but to set Captain Lennox free. Shall I tell you why it is your interest to set him at liberty? Because Inez La Vega loves him!"

"Ah!"

"And because the brave Colonel Egerton, Mad Tom Egerton of Blazing Ranche, is desperately enamored with the money of Inez La Vega—so much so that he stole a large quantity of her wealth when he was at the hacienda. Aid me to free the captain, and Colonel Egerton never marries Inez La Vega, as he now thinks of doing."

"You are driving me mad," cried Juanetta, pressing her hand to her forehead. "I tell you that you wrong him. Colonel Egerton does not love Inez La Vega."

"Call in Pedro La Vega; tax him with it and see if I have not told you the truth. Why, it is no secret among the men."

"Stay here," cried Juanetta, "I will satisfy myself, and if what you say is true, I will join you in any plan for revenge."

"Be careful what you do," said Guy. "Do not betray me until you are certain I have lied."

"You may trust me," replied Juanetta. "I will see the bottom of this villainy."

She caught up her little Scotch bonnet, which lay upon the couch, and hurried out. Just outside the door Pedro La Vega

was lounging about in the sunshine, in the lazy way peculiar to men of his race, but his dull eye brightened as he saw her. Pedro was not altogether disinterested in promoting the marriage between his sister and Egerton, for he loved Juanetta, and hoped that, Egerton once disposed of, he might win her for himself. She beckoned to him, and he came forward hastily.

"You keep away from me a great deal," she said, with a faint smile. "I do not like that in the least."

"If I had thought you cared to have me come, I should not have given you the opportunity to reproach me," replied Pedro. "But Colonel Egerton and I can never be rivals."

"I thought he was to marry your sister," said Juanetta, quietly.

Pedro looked at her in utter amazement. "Who told you that?" he gasped.

"Suppose Egerton told me himself; what then?"

"But did he?"

"Why not?"

"Ah, indeed! why not? You may well say why not. Only I thought you might have been but little pleased."

"Are you sorry it gives me no pain?" said the finished dissembler.

"I! Not at all. It pleases me beyond description that you take it so easily. I meant to speak to you of it soon, but you have come before me. It is true, then, the colonel is to marry my sister."

"Does she care for him?"

"I can not say that she does, for the girl is mad about this captain we took yesterday, and no doubt will give some trouble."

"I hope our friend, the colonel, may speed well in his wooing," said Juanetta. "And to think that you should suspect me of having any interest in the matter! It is really laughable. I must not stay here now, my friend. Let me see more of you in the future."

Pedro looked after her in a dubious manner as she entered the house. He had a sort of indistinct notion that, like Tony Lumpkin, he "could bear witness that he was no better than a fool," for he began to be afraid that he had let out that

which he should have kept to himself. Juanetta closed the door behind her and then flung herself down upon the hard floor in a beautiful and statuesque attitude, with her arms wreathed about her head in a despairing way. Guy raised her in his arms and carried her to the couch.

"Patience," he said. "Yours is a hard fate, but you have found that I did not deceive you, and that I am only here for your good. Let me beg of you to consider well what I said, and promise me your aid."

"You shall have it. Any thing, any thing to have vengeance on him."

"Not vengeance. You love him too well for that, I know. But we will balk his designs, for I promise you, upon my honor, that he shall never marry Inez La Vega. Her heart in this respect is like yours, and I know she will never love but one, and that one is Ralph Lennox. Let me tell you what to do."

"I am listening."

"You must not break out upon him to-day. If you do, he will suspect and watch you, and that would never answer. You know the passes through the woods, do you not?"

"Yes."

"And you can get the word for the night?"

"Easily."

"Then keep your temper until night, when we will set the captain at liberty. You could not strike a heavier blow at his design than that."

"I believe you. In the mean time, what are you going to do?"

"Remember that I am still the idiot; no one can play a part better than I. Brush; some one comes. Get up quickly."

Juanetta sat up again, but kept her head turned from the door, while Guy, lying upon the floor, was picking idly at the strings of the guitar, and laughing in an odd way.

"Send this boy away," said the colonel, who had entered. "What does he want here?"

"Let him stay, Egerton" replied the girl, with great composure. "You surely do not fear the simple fellow."

"That's it," said Guy. "Simple, simple. Do you know I have been called that a great many times, but I'm as sly as a

fox. *Oute*, the Yankees say. You had a fight down there at the hacienda last night, didn't you, colonel?"

"Pshaw!"

"Yes, for I heard the guns and hid. I'm always ready to hide when I hear guns. I don't like guns, you know. I've seen fellows, now, that, to hear them talk, you'd think they eat guns every morning for breakfast, but they don't. They like beef and cabbage better, and so do I."

"Come here, Juanetta," said Egerton. "What were you saying to Pedro La Vega just now?"

"Why?"

"Because his face was so full of idiotic joy that it made me angry. Be careful what you do, for I am not the man to play fast and loose with."

"You surely are not jealous?"

"That Pedro is an idiot. How dare you say any thing to him in that way?"

"Only in the same way that you were talking of his sister."

"His sister?"

"Yes. You know you vexed me by praising her, and I thought I would pay you off."

"I am going out on a scout," said the chief, rising. "You had better keep a sharp eye upon the men. I find them disaffected, and expect trouble from them before long, which I will nip in the bud. Here is the key to the prisoner's door. Keep watch over him, for I may not be back to-night."

"Where are you going?"

"Who can tell? I expect to have a set-to with Dimmick's rangers."

"Is that it?"

"Of course. What else could it be?"

He was, in fact, going out to look for Inez La Vega, and had not the slightest desire to meet with Dimmick's rangers, having already had a wholesome estimate of their capacities as fighting men. Juanetta understood this, but she had too strong a will to suffer her passion to break out.

"Good-by, Tom. Perhaps good-by forever, and if you don't come back I will weep for you all my life long. And be sure of this, you will never find a woman who can be more true to you than poor Juanetta Guzman."

"What are you thinking of?" he said, impulsively catching her to his bosom. "Give me a kiss, my darling. I have half a mind to throw it all aside and go to Mexico. But no: the dice are in my hands and I must abide the throw, come weal, come woe."

He rushed from the room, and Juanetta rose like a Pytho-ness and shook both clinched hands at him.

"Go, and may the curse of a blighted heart fall on you wherever you may go! May you lead an unquiet life, and sink into an unhallowed grave, unwept and unloved! May your hopes turn to ashes on your lips and heart like the fruit of the Dead Sea, and may you learn in a bitter hour the pangs of unavailing love!"

"Juanetta!"

A hand was laid upon her shoulder, and the beautiful eyes of Guy Gaudelet were looking into hers:

"'Bless, and curse not,' poor girl. If you could see below this mask of paint and dirt you would see how much your sorrow grieves me. My poor, forsaken, desolate child, the sin of this man will find him out. Then he will know that a love like yours is not to be bought or sold, and that it is priceless. I feel like a prophet now, and I tell you that I know that you will yet be happy, for every man has his better angel, and Egerton's has not yet left him. He may repent; he will, in the hour when he knows that his plans are abortive—that the unreal castle his hopes have built up is in the dust. Wait."

He ran to the door and threw it open. The troop was already in the saddle, and riding slowly out of the village, with Egerton at their head, sitting erect in the saddle, and never turning his head. The quadroon could not help being struck by his noble and manly appearance.

"He must have feeling in his heart," he murmured. "We shall find it in the end."

One by one the troop disappeared, leaving only five men in the village besides the wounded. Two of these men, armed with muskets, were walking to and fro in front of the building in which the Texan captain was confined. As soon as the troop had disappeared, Guy strolled out and passed these guards, grimacing at them as he did so.

"I command here now, you fellows," he said. "Bah, what are you thinking of walking up and down there? Why don't you sit down and rest?"

"Get away, you atom," said one of the guards, "unless you want a bayonet in you."

"No I don't. It is sharp and might hurt."

"Well, walk about, if you want to, but don't bother us. We haven't got time to fool with you. Go away from here."

"What are you going to do with that man inside? It would be better for his health to be out here where he could get the sun."

"I should not be surprised if it would," said the guard, laughing. "Get out of this."

Guy staid long enough to find out the position of the doors and windows, and then strolled back to the house. All through that beautiful day he rambled about the village, talking in the simple way of the being he represented with the women, and playing with the children, who seemed to take to him instinctively. It was nothing new to them to see the supposed idiot about the camp, for it had been his custom for the last year to go where he liked, and he was always welcomed into the guerrilla camps. In his artless, childish way, he had often given them information, although if they had thought it over they would have remembered that his information never amounted to any thing in the end.

Night came, and the captain was lying upon his hard couch, thinking of the past and calculating his chances for the present. He had eaten a frugal supper, and dressed his own wound as well as he could. The guards were pacing up and down before the door, for he could hear their regular footsteps. As he lay there, he heard a full rich voice answer the challenge of the guard.

"It is I, Gaspard," it said.

"Señora Juanetta?"

"Yes; I am going to visit the prisoner. While I am here, see that he does not overpower me and break out, for I have heard that he is a desperate ruffian, and capable of any deed."

"We will see to that, señora," replied the man called Gas-

pard. "If he tries to break out, he shall have six inches of my bayonet for a keepsake, and I doubt if that will suit his book."

The key rattled in the stout lock; the door was thrown open, and Juanetta, bearing a lighted lantern, entered the room and closed the door behind her. The captain rose and saluted her respectfully.

"Señor captain," said Juanetta, "I have come to aid you. Speak low as you value your life. You saw that idiot boy who followed the band to this place to-day?"

"I did."

"You had never seen him?"

"No."

"You think so. Bend closer and I will tell you who he is. His name is Guy Gaudet, the Quadroon Spy, so well known along this border."

"Ha! Is it possible that the youngster could so change himself that I did not know him? He must have revealed himself to you."

"He did."

"And you did not betray him?"

"No."

"That is strange, belonging as you do to this wild band. No, it is not so strange after all, for beauty and grace are always combined with goodness."

"Enough; there is no time for compliment. I am about to pass out, but I will leave the key with you. When you hear three raps upon the door, open it, and come out."

"How can I thank you?"

"By attending to what I say to you. When you hear the sound, unlock the door without fear, and come with me at once."

She went out, and he heard her telling the guard to keep good watch. Peeping through the keyhole, he saw the two men's heads together over some object they had found near the door, which, upon examination, proved to be a bottle of aguardiente, a fiery liquor much loved by the Mexicans, and the seductions of which they could not resist. How the bottle had come there was not the mooted question with them, but how to drink it as soon as possible, and they proceeded to do it

with all dispatch. The liquor appeared to be very strong, for in half an hour the two men lay stretched upon the earth. The captain put the key into the lock and waited. Soon he heard the welcome signal, and turning the key, he stole out. Guy Gaudelet, in his disguise of the idiot, stood there.

"Lock the door," he whispered. "Be quick, for they may take a fancy to change the guard. Don't stop to talk now."

Guy plunged into the bushes as soon as he could, and led the way over a tangled path a short distance, until they came to a sheltered glade, where Juanetta awaited them, holding two horses by their bridles.

"I ask but one thing of you in reward, Captain Lennox, and that is that you swear to me that Thomas Egerton shall never marry Inez La Vega."

"Not while I live," replied the captain.

"Thank you. Mount and away then. Guy Gaudelet will guide you safely through the chapparal."

CHAPTER X.

THE SOLVED RIDDLE.

THEY rode away in the darkness, leaving Juanetta Guzman standing beneath the shadow of a great tree, with her hand upon her forehead, in an attitude of wild despair, such as only a wronged woman could assume; and so they lost her. The spy said not a word, and was evidently struggling with the feeling in his breast; when he did speak his voice was subdued and sad.

"That is a noble woman, Captain Ralph—a woman for whom a man might die, and count it glorious. But God pity Thomas Egerton, for there is a lurking tiger in her blood, and who can say how soon it may break out? Follow me closely, and speak no more, for there may be spies upon the path."

The night was intensely dark, and Lennox could barely see the moving figure of Guy before him. The dense forest through which they were passing closed them in on every

sides, leaving only a narrow bridle-path. Guy moved like one who knew his course well, and the captain, wholly at a loss, followed him without fear, for he had learned to trust this wild boy in every thing. All at once they emerged from the thick chapparal and were pursuing their way beside the rapid river, when Guy spoke :

"We are out of danger now, captain. Upon my honor, that was a close thing for you. I suppose that our worthy friend proposed to hang you."

"Exactly. But he was so kind as to say that I should only hang except in your company."

"I ask no better companion in life or death," said Guy. "I do not know how it is, but you have bewitched me, I think. But, whatever befalls, you may be sure of one who will follow you to the death, and that one is the Quadroon Spy."

"Can I doubt that, my brave fellow?" said the captain. "I suppose you will use this disguise no more."

"Not in that camp. It would be too much to ask Juanetta not to betray me, if she caught me there again in that garb. What of that? there are more disguises than one. We must cross the river here, but I dare not try it until the moon rises."

They dismounted upon the river-bank, and getting out the lariats, drove the pegs into the earth and let the horses feed. Then they sat for half an hour beside the beautiful stream, talking in low tones of the fate of Texas, and of the coming struggle with Egerton, when they heard the tramp of horses, and knew that a band of some kind had come down upon the other side of the stream. Guy sprung up, and calling to his companion to follow, drew the peg from the earth and vaulted into the saddle, signaling to the captain to do the same. They were in a sort of *cot de sac*, which led down to the water's edge, but with rocky paths leading up the sides. Up this path went Guy Gaudet, followed by the captain, until they were so far from the path that the feet of their horses could not be heard, when Guy slipped out of the saddle and gave his bridle to the captain.

"Hold him," he said. "I am going back."

"What are you going back for?"

"I must see who this is," replied the spy. "But first, I

must shed my disguise, for if I am taken it must be as Guy Gaudclet, not as the idiot, for that might compromise Juanetta."

He rapidly drew off his outer garments, and showed beneath the neat uniform of the rangers, and turning his cap inside out, the cap he wore at the rangers' camp was revealed. The moon was now shining brightly, and he caught the comical look of surprise upon the face of the captain. There was a pool of water at their feet, and stooping, the spy washed his face and hands in it, and "Richard was himself again."

"I am going back with you," said the captain.

"You are not going to do any thing of the kind, sir. In the first place, you are wounded, and in the second, I doubt your capacity as a scout. Of course you are angry, but I refuse to have you with me."

He darted away with a step light as falling feathers, and left the captain sitting in his saddle, holding the horses. The course of the young spy led him across the rocks to the water's edge, and looking down, he saw that the troop, whoever it was, were in the water and crossing rapidly. Lying prostrate among the rocks, he peeped through a crevice, and saw the first man land. It was Egerton and his band.

"Aha, my worthy guerrilla," thought Guy. "We meet sooner than I expected. I wonder what mischief he is after now."

He watched the band as they crossed the river, while Egerton and the brother of Inez sat in their saddles, not twenty feet away, superintending the landing of the troops.

"You think we can take them unawares, do you?" said Pedro.

"I know it. They think we are safe in our haunt, and are resting incautiously upon this bank of the river, not a mile below. But, to get at them, we must make a *detour* of three miles."

"I hope we may succeed, for I hate the very name of Texan Ranger. It was for one of these men that I was driven out of Austin."

"I understand; you stabbed him."

"The scoundrel insulted me."

" You Mexicans are too quick with the knife. Now I can kill a man who insults me, but it must be in a fair fight. As for this Dimmick, I have an old grudge against him. He broke up my camp once, before the war, and very nearly destroyed the band. Hurry up, men : we shall never get to work if we are so slow."

Guy heard enough. He began to creep away from the dangerous vicinity upon his hands and knees, drawing himself along the ground like a serpent. As soon as he could do so safely he rose, shook his clinched hand at the band of Egerton, and stole back to the place where the captain was waiting.

Meanwhile, happily unconscious of the spy, the band of Egerton drew out of the water, and showed themselves on the bank nearly three hundred strong, for they had picked up a few stragglers from the Mexican army during the day, who had joined them. They rode away through the pass and reached the open country, until they saw, just before them, the campfire of the rangers. The outlaws knew what they were expected to do, and, rising in their stirrups, they uttered a war-cry which might have rivaled the charging cry of the Navajoes, and bore down upon the camp.

Instead of the utter confusion they expected, the wild panic of the guards, and cries of terror, no sound was heard save that of their own making, for the camp was empty. The camp-fires still blazed, but not a soul was there to meet them !

Every thing showed that the rangers had left in some haste, for several packs of cards, canteens, and the paraphernalia of a camp, were scattered around. As they stared about them in dismay, a terrible volley from the rifles of the rangers ensconced in the chaparral which surrounded the camp upon two sides swept through their crowded ranks, and while they were in confusion they heard the order, given in stentorian tones :

" Prepare to mount ; mount ! charge, ye devils, charge !"

A torrent seemed to pour at once upon the force of Egerton. A body of fierce rangers, their reins loose upon their horses' necks, pistol and knife in hand, shooting and stabbing. Foremost in the ranks rode Ned Dimmick, and close by his side the man he thought safe in the cabin at the village, Captain Lennox ! Cursing his ill-fortune, he gave the word to his me

and led the flight out of the dangerous predicament into which he had brought them. The rangers pursued, slaying as they rode, but were called back by the bugle of Dimmick, who feared an ambush.

"Well done, boys," he cried. "Now, then, where is that boy? I want to hug him."

A few words will explain how it was that Egerton received a warm reception and did not surprise the camp. The rangers were at their ease, never dreaming of a surprise, and playing "all-fours," when two men came riding into camp at a headlong gallop, and warned them of the coming of the enemy. It was Guy Gaudet and Captain Lennox, who had crossed a dangerous pass which cut off a mile and a half of country, and so got in long before the outlaws and laid that little trap for them, the bait of which they took so nicely. But Guy, the one who had been the real cause of this victory, was nowhere to be seen, although they knew that he was in the charge. The men got torches, and searched up and down until they found him sitting at the foot of a rock, his face distorted by pain.

"What is it, Guy?" said Dimmick. "You ain't hit? don't tell me you are hit."

"I'm afraid I got a touch, Ned," said Guy, raising his head. "Let me alone; it's nothing but a flesh wound."

"Where is it?"

Guy pointed to the blood soaking through the cloth on his left shoulder.

"You strip off that coat," said Dimmick. "I want to see that wound. You kain't fool with that sort of cut in this climate, boy."

Guy rose with difficulty and whispered in his ear. He started back with a queer look upon his rough face, as if he wanted to laugh and didn't know how to begin.

"Orter 'a' trusted old Ned before," he growled. "Git away, you fellers, and let me see this boy's hurt. I guess 'tain't nothing, so to speak."

The men fell back and left them together.

"Get through with it as soon as you can, before the captain finds us. He is searching for me in another part of the field."

Ned Dimmick helped the boy to take off his coat and

slashed the shoulder of the shirt with a Bowie, and found the wound. "Humph!" he said. "I am a durned fool, and I've got a lot of durned fools riding behind me. As to the wound, 'tain't much. I'll patch it up in a minnit. I'd make more of it if it war anybody but you."

"Hurry," said Guy. "Those are the captain's torches yonder, and they come this way."

The life which Ned Dimmick had led had made him something of a surgeon, and in a very short space he had stopped the flow of blood and bandaged the wound, which was a slight one. All through the operation he had the air of a man who had been guessing at a riddle and been told the solution.

"Oh, blame my cats if this don't beat all!" he muttered. "Wal, we won't have no more of it, you know. I won't stand it."

"Do you wish to drive me to join another company, Ned Dimmick?"

"I guess you'd better try that on, my lad. You better not rile me, or I'll git so pizen mad I'll *spile*. Then you mean to keep at it?"

"Until Texas is free," replied Guy, with kindling eyes. "Hush; here comes the captain, and remember that I have trusted you."

Ralph came up hastily.

"They tell me you are wounded," he said. "I shall never forgive myself if it is any thing serious."

"It is not, captain," said Guy, rising. "You see that I can walk readily, and in a day I can use my arm. I don't mind these little cuts."

"I wish you would not expose yourself to danger in that way," said Ralph. "Leave that to older and stronger men, to whom fighting is a pastime. You can do us better service than that as a scout, where you have no need to fight."

"I must do my duty," said Guy, shaking his head. "What do you propose to do, major; shall we beat up the quarters of Egerton's banditti to-morrow?"

"Yes; we give him such an all-fired drubbing to-night, it will kinder take the pluck out of him, and he won't fight nigh so well. You see if we don't lick him out of his boots."

"Agreed. I shall never have rest until Egerton is driven out of Texas, for he is the boldest of our enemies."

Egerton rode hard all night with a moody brow. Things had been working against him since he first thought of being untrue to Juanetta. Before, he had been successful, cutting out wagon-trains, running down stragglers, and ranging the country at will from Brownville to the east. The men were rowling, for they had got nothing except hard knocks lately and that did not suit them.

"I wonder how that accursed captain escaped," he said. "Do you think Juanetta had any thing to do with it, Pedro?"

"Why should she?"

"I don't know. It is the strangest thing to me that he got away from two of my best men. Do you know any thing definite of that idiot boy?"

"Nothing, except that he is free to enter any camp in Mexico."

"He won't stay long in mine when I get back. A dog that can fetch a bone can carry a bone, and if he brings information to us, it is just as easy to carry information to the enemy. I don't know that we ever got any good from what he told us. What is that, Con?"

"Ranger has just come in to say, that there is a convoy of two wagons in front."

"Any guards?"

"A few Mexicans."

"Take twenty or thirty men and make a dash at them, and see that you bring a good account of them."

The young Mexican selected his men and dashed away. A short ride brought him up to the two wagons, which were moving slowly down the road, guarded by a dozen men in citizens' clothing, who ran like heroes at the first onset, without striking a blow, while the band surrounded the wagons, dragged the teamsters from their seats, and waited for their companions.

"Oh, señors," howled the teamsters. "In the name of the Holy Virgin, spare our lives. We are poor men and have nothing. Oh, St. Peter, pray for us. Holy--"

"Stop your infernal mouth," cried Pedro. "What do you mean, you ruffian, by such howling as that? Do you want your throat cut across from ear to ear?"

"Oh, señor general—"

"Then I have been promoted, thanks to you. Who owns these wagons?"

"I do!" cried a manly voice. Pedro turned, pistol in hand, and saw his father standing in front of one of the wagons, with folded arms.

What was he doing here?

CHAPTER XI.

WHERE EGERTON WENT.

THE meeting with his father was so entirely unexpected, that Pedro staggered back in surprise and looked at him with open eyes. Just then the colonel rode up at the head of the band, and uttered a joyful cry as he saw who it was.

"We are made men," he said. "The hacienda is our own. Scatter everywhere and do not let a man of them escape, on your lives. Here is something which will repay us for all we have suffered. Pedro, come here."

The officers held a hurried conference, and then young La Vega approached his father:

"I am glad to meet you, *mon pere*," he said, "and must offer you the hospitality of our camp for a few days. Get a horse for him some of you fellows."

A horse was brought, and the señor mounted without a word, for he saw the uselessness of resistance. In the mean time the twelve men who had guarded the wagons, were brought in one by one until it was certain not one had escaped.

"Now what shall we do with the fellows? I say, my friends do you wish to be hung up by the heels upon these trees?"

"Oh, señor, have mercy. We are unfortunate but not vicious. Save our lives and we will do any thing."

"What have you in these wagons?"

"Provisions, señor."

"For the hacienda?"

"No; for the Texans. We were to leave the wagons a mile or two further on and take our way back at once."

"Then you have enough provisions in the hacienda to last some time?"

"Enough to serve a regiment of lancers for six months."

"Good. Now I give you an opportunity to save your lives. Enlist in my regiment, and fight in the cause of Mexico and all shall go well with you. Refuse, and I will hang you to the highest trees I can find. What do you say?"

They enlisted, fired by sudden valor in the cause of Mexico, and the band swung into line, with the worthy recruits riding among them, and turned their horses' heads to the south. These midnight rides suited the men of Egerton. They were born horse-thieves and footpads, and the cover of night was their shield. While they rode away upon their secret mission, the party under the charge of La Vega made its way into the fastness in the forest, reaching it just as morning broke. Juanetta, an early riser, heard them as they rode in, and came out to meet them. La Vega, without a word to her, leaped out of his saddle and ran to the building in which the captain had been confined. As he did so the two guards presented arms to him.

"Where is the prisoner?" he cried.

"He is all right, señor," said one of the men. "*Maledethe*, do you think he could escape while we guarded the door?"

"Have you slept?"

"Slept upon guard? Señor La Vega, you do not know us or else you would not ask the question."

"Open the door."

One of the men, who had a key, threw it open, and La Vega entered the room to find it empty and the bird flown.

"Who visited the prison last night?" he demanded, turning to the guards, who stood there open-mouthed.

"Nobody except the Señora Juanetta, and she did not stay five minutes."

"Ha," said La Vega. "That will do, yet how could he pass if you did not sleep."

"Señor, I believe this man is a witch. In my opinion, he came out through the keyhole."

"Probably. You may go to breakfast, as there is nothing to guard here. When the colonel returns he will inquire into this affair, but for the present, you are dismissed."

The two men slunk away, resolved to swear through thick and thin that they had not slept or even dreamed of such an enormity. La Vega, with a puzzled look upon his face, walked to the place where Juanetta was standing.

"Where is the prisoner?" he said.

"He is free," replied Juanetta, promptly.

"Who set him free?"

"I did!" answered the girl, quietly. "I did not see what we could gain by hanging him and I let him go."

"And you have revealed the secret of our hiding-place."

"There are others equally as good," said the girl, in the same quiet tone. "I am ready to abide by my deeds and stand the penalty. Where is Egerton?"

"He has been beaten in an assault upon the camp of Dimmick, and is away upon another expedition. You will at once go about among the women, and apprise them of the danger, and let them set out at once for the Casa Grande, where we will make our next camp."

"Am I to go with them?"

"Yes; unless you will listen to me. It is better for you to know that you should give up all hope of marrying Colonel Egerton, for he is madly in love with Inez. As for me, I love you. Listen to me and do not throw so much scorn into your face. I know that you have loved Colonel Egerton, and perhaps love him now. But, you are too proud a woman to live scorned of any man. Be my wife and I will be your shield against all the world."

"How dare you speak to me like this Pedro La Vega? Do you know that, if Egerton knew this, he would have your heart's blood?"

"What care I? Two could play at that game, and I might come out first best. I did not think you would suffer yourself to be cast aside like a broken toy for another woman's

sake. Do not flatter yourself that a spark of love for you remains in the cold heart of Egerton, for he has seen my sister and you are discarded. Take my word for it, your act last night in setting the prisoner free, will be his pretext for casting you off."

"He dare not!" hissed Juanetta. "For his life, he dare not! Listen to me, Pedro La Vega: prove to me beyond peradventure that it is love for the beauty of your sister which has tempted this man and not her wealth, and I will give you my hand and follow you over the world."

"Agreed," he cried, eagerly. "I am glad you have given me that hope. Go among the women and acquaint them with the danger before them and then come to me. I have some business with this old man."

"Who is he?"

"He has the honor to be my father, and I took him last night. He is as arrant a traitor as ever trod the earth in mortal frame."

"Let him free."

"What did you say?"

"Release him, and at once, or I now retract my promise, and would do it, were the man I love a thousand times false."

"It is done," said Pedro, bowing. "You see that I refuse you nothing, only it must be made to appear that he escaped. Leave that to me."

"I trust you," said Juanetta. "And now, I will do my part of the business."

As she disappeared among the huts, Pedro La Vega approached his father, who had dismounted and was standing beside his horse looking quietly about him, noting the strange village which these men had built up in the wilderness. Pedro signed to him to follow, and called to a man who was a favorite follower to come with them. They rode out of the clearing, and in half an hour Pedro came back alone.

"I have done it," he said. "He will be guided by Gaston out of the woods, and when it's done he will escape; and Gaston will return to tell me so. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes; you have kept your word nobly, and I will not forget it."

In an hour from that time the village was deserted, the women leaving it under the guidance of three or four men, while the rest followed Juanetta and the major. They had only been gone a short time, when the sound of a step was heard, and the Quadroon Spy ran in among the deserted huts, and satisfied himself that he had come too late. Raising a whistle to his lips he blew a shrill note, and the rangers came trooping in, headed by Dimmick and Lennox.

"Dug out, eh?" said Dimmick. "Now don't that beat all natur'! Oh, waken snakes, if this ain't more than the old man kin b'ar!"

"They have changed their camp," said the spy. "But, upon looking about me, I don't believe that Egerton has been here at all. There are enough old tracks, but these new ones were made by less than forty men, I am sure. Egerton is off upon some other business, and we must try back upon the trail, and see which way he has gone. The band are demoralized and we can beat them, although their numbers are greater. Come on."

The band were already in the saddle, and the young spy led the way as quick as possible through the tangled path. A stretch of open country lay before them as they passed out of the chapparal, and about two miles away, going at a good rate of speed, they saw a small mounted force riding away to the south.

"Ha! look yonder," cried Dimmick. "Take forty men and ride like the devil and run those fellows down. We must see who they are."

It did not take five minutes to pick out the men, and the spy was one of them, although not chosen.

"Come back here, Guy," cried Dimmick. "I won't stand it; you're hurt."

"I must go, major; do not try to stop me, for it is useless."

"Come on," cried the captain, eagerly. "Let him go with me, major. I will see that he does not get hurt."

Away they went at a breakneck pace. Their course lay between two low ranges of hills, with a valley half a mile wide between. "To the right," cried the spy, pointing with his dagger. "Pass through the hills and meet them on the other side."

The troop in front had not seen them, and the hills hid them from view. With whip and spur they rode down the opposite valley for three miles, until they found another opening in the hills, and passed through. The device of Guy had succeeded; they had passed the enemy, who were a few hundred yards in the rear. As he saw the troop of wild horsemen pour out of the glen, Pedro La Vega drew bridle, and wheeling his horse, rode back at full gallop, calling to his men to follow.

"We have them," cried Captain Ralph. "I know that officer, Guy. It is young La Vega, and, as I live, I think the lady with them is Juanetta. Fire not a shot, for your lives."

Hemmed in upon both sides, Pedro La Vega knew not which way to turn. Dimmick and his men were thundering down from above, Lennox was in front, and he saw that he was in a trap.

"Surrender," cried Lennox, "and take quarter."

"I yield," said La Vega, "since I can do no better."

"Throw down your weapons and dismount," said Captain Ralph.

They threw their weapons upon the sward, and were quickly surrounded by the rangers and tied. Lennox came forward and offered his hand to Juanetta.

"I have to thank you, señora," he said. "These are rough times for a lady to be abroad. But have no fear, for the Texans do not war against women. You are free to go where you like."

"You did that well, Ralph," said Dimmick, now coming up. "Who is that officer?"

"Major Pedro La Vega, of Egerton's lancers," replied the Mexican, coming up. "By my life, you are the man for stabbing whom I was made an outlaw. I am glad to know that I have escaped that crime."

"That's all right," said Dimmick, laughing. "It wasn't exactly a fair lick you gave me, but it's over now. Have you surrendered?"

"Yes."

"Who is the gal?"

"A lady under my protection," said Captain Ralph. "The Señora Juanetta Guzman, who set me free last night."

"I know'd her father," said Dimmick. "Many a wuss man is made a guerrilla by sarcumstances, and though he and I war inemis, he fou't fair. Wal, we don't want to keep ycu, señora. You can go whar you like, unless you like to ride under our pertection."

"I will go with you," said Juanetta. "I suppose you fol low Egerton, and I must find him."

"I s'pose you couldn't be pervailed on to tell us whar he is?" said Dimmick.

"I would die first, even if I knew."

"Then we'll hev to depend on the meejor. Come, La Vega, whar's this precious cunnel of yours?"

"I will not tell."

"Psho, now; don't be foolish that way! You've got to tell, you know. I've heerd men before you talk that they wouldn't do this, and they wouldn't do that, but they listened to reason, arter all. I'm going to know whar Tom Egerton went last night, arter that little misunderstanding with us. He didn't go back to camp, you know."

"How can you tell that?"

"I dunno as I'm called on to say. It's enough that I'm morally certain he didn't go back to camp, but that he did go south. The question is, whar did he go to?"

"That is for you to discover," said Pedro, with a sneering laugh.

"Now, look yer, mister; don't you go to be obstinit. I'm morally bound to know *whar* he went, and you must be the one to tell me. Come now; spit it out, quick."

"I don't propose to tell you, my good man," said Pedro. "You have taken me, and that is bad enough in itself. As to my betraying any secrets, if you think that I will do it, you don't know me, that's all."

"Obstinit, eh? Got a lariat thar on your saddle, Long Bill Epps? Take it off, then, and make a slip-noose in one eend. I awfully hate to do any thing to this boy, because he's got a good father, but he's a pizon devil himself, so it don't matter so much. Ride on till we git to a tree, boys. Bring them other critters along."

"Confound it!" muttered Pedro. "I believe he is in earnest."

At this moment the sound of hoofs at full gallop announced the coming of a horseman, and the Señor La Vega, disordered by hard riding and with his clothing splashed with mud and water, burst into the group.

"Hold hard thar," said Dimmick. "Ain't you ruther in a hurry, old man? What's up?"

"Egerton has taken the hacienda," cried he, out of breath, "and has barricaded it against us."

"How do you know that?" cried the old ranger, sitting erect and stern in the saddle, his hand gripping the hilt of a Bowie in a vice-like hold. "The pizen devil!"

"I was taken by my son last night, as I was bringing out the provisions I promised you. I now see he is a prisoner. He carried me to their secret haunt in the woods and kept me there a short time, when I was set at liberty through the intercession of that lady. I rode toward the hacienda, but a few miles further down I was met by one of my men, who had been forced to join the enemy, but escaped from them, and who told me that the hacienda had just been taken."

"How?"

"He dressed ten of his men in the garments worn by my men whom he had taken, and sent them ahead, and the gates were opened to them. It was a complete surprise, and the hacienda is entirely in their power."

"The devil! And the place is like a castle, too, and with men like his inside, there is no way of taking it," growled the major. "It was a cute trick, though, and well carried out."

"What is to be done?"

"Come with me, major," said Guy Gaudelet. "I would not have the prisoners hear what we have to say."

The two moved aside together and spoke in low, impassioned tones, and by the gestures of the ranger they could see that he was fearfully excited.

In the end they separated, and then the spy leaped into the saddle and rode away to the south, while the rangers followed more slowly.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

THE plan of Tom Egerton had succeeded and the hacienda La Vega was in his hands. His first care was to make it impervious to outside assaults, and then he sat down to enjoy himself, like a knight of old in his castle. He knew that if he held this place until the coming of Santa Anna, who had crossed the river, it would probably be the base of operation for the Mexican army in their advance, and he would gain great honor by its capture. He had enough of the rangers already, for he saw that his men were not to be trusted in the open field against them. He had thought to take Inez La Vega in capturing the hall, but, to his anger, he found that she had already left the hacienda for some more secure retreat, and his plan of forcing her to a marriage with him fell to the ground.

He had taken possession of the room formerly occupied by the elder La Vega, and here he passed his time luxuriously, drinking the rare old wine stored in the vaults of the hacienda, and smoking the señor's cigarettes. Many books were scattered about, for the señor was a great reader, and Egerton, whose tastes were naturally of a voluptuous cast, enjoyed himself to the utmost. At night he was sitting at the window, puffing tranquilly at a cigarette, when he heard a low, mournful sound begin to rise and swell within the room—a sound which was like the wail of a lost soul, and seemed to pierce to his very marrow. He started up and looked about him, but though the sound continued, he could not see from what source it came.

Thomas Egerton was not superstitious, but that strange sound, coming as it did from the darkness, woke a sudden awe within him, and he moved cautiously as one who treads upon a grave might do, staring from right to left. The sound still filled the room—the sound which might have been the wail of a dying spirit.

"Curse it," cried Egerton, uneasily, starting up. "Hallo, without there! Lights, bring lights. Why do you leave me here alone in the dark, with these unearthly sounds about me?"

A frightened woman, one of those who had remained in the hacienda, and had been captured by the outlaws, hurried in with a lamp, which she set upon the table, bowed low and made a motion to retire.

"Wait," he said. "Have you lived long in this building?"

"Yes; many years, señor."

"Did you ever hear any sounds which could not be accounted for?"

"Yes, señor. There is the lady who walks and plays upon the harp."

"A lady who walks and plays the harp. Is that it?"

The music again rose and swelled in the room, and the woman started and turned pale. "Yes, yes, that is it, señor. Oh, for the Virgin's sake do not stay in this room. It is the spirit of the murdered dead that walks."

"Spirit, you say? Let me warn that spirit not to show itself to me, for, so surely as it does, I will try whether earthly powder and ball will not affect it."

"Surely you would not fire at it?" said the woman, in a horrified tone.

"Do not be too sure of that, woman. I am quick-tempered, and practical jokes do not suit me. Therefore let this ghost look to itself, for I will try the merit of powder and ball."

"Fool!" cried a hollow voice.

Turning quickly, he saw standing near the foot of the high curtained bed, a woman in a long white robe with a large veil thrown loosely over her head, looking like a bride prepared for the altar, and one white hand outstretched, the finger pointing at him with a flickering, convulsed motion. Upon that hand stretched out toward him, was a single spot of blood. Egerton covered his face with his hands, so sudden was the apparition, and when he looked again the figure was not there. He drew a pistol and ran to the foot of the bed, but his search revealed nothing. As he looked about in horrified dismay, he heard a low, taunting laugh from the other side of the room, but when he turned he could see nothing.

"The devil is in this house," he cried.

"Let him leave it, then," said the voice which maddened him. "Man, the guilt of blood will be on your own soul if you remain. Take your myrimidons, and leave the house which opens willingly only to honorable men."

"Come out and face me, devil that you are," shrieked the outlaw. "Man, woman or demon, dare to look me in the face once more."

"Your crimes are rank in the sight of heaven," cried the solemn tones, "and I speak with the voice of a prophet. Give over your design against a woman who never wronged you, and turn again to Juanetta who loves you far better than such a man deserves to be loved."

"Listen, whoever you may be," cried the outlaw. "I do not love Inez La Vega as I love Juanetta Guzman. All you can say in favor of that noble girl will be true, and although I am forced by circumstances to abandon her, I shall never cease to love her, and I know that she would willingly shield me from danger with her own life."

"Can you be such a villain as to leave her, then?"

"I have but one object in life, to win honor and wealth. Of the first, such as it is, I have enough. From the gulf to the sea I am known and feared, and by marrying Inez La Vega, I shall be rich enough."

"She does not love you, wretch; nay, she hates you."

"That makes no difference," said the colonel, who began to suspect some mechanical contrivance or ventriloquism in all this. "I will make myself master of her wealth and then she may love me or not, as she chooses."

"Farewell, then, fool that you are. Never shall you see the hour when Inez La Vega is your wife."

The voice ceased and he sat down to think, with his face buried in his hands. A rap at the door startled him, and he looked up quickly and saw the same woman who had brought him the light, and who had fled at the sight of the apparition.

"The Señora Inez La Vega is in the hacienda, and wishes to see you, señor."

"Where is she?" he cried, eagerly. "Lead me to her." The woman took up the light and led the way. As they

passed out into the hall the sound of tumult below, a drunken chorus and wild shouts of revelry, told that his men were resolutely bent upon enjoying the good liquor in the cellars.

"I hope La Vega will not let the fools get too drunk," the colonel thought. "I'll see to it, after I have spoken with this girl, who is mad to put herself into my hands in this way. I had half a mind to take the ghostly advice, and keep my faith with poor Juanetta."

The woman threw open the door of a room upon one side of the great hall and Egerton entered. Inez La Vega was standing near a window, looking out, but turned as he entered.

"You may go, 'Nita," said she. "I wish to speak with the colonel."

"This is something I hardly dared to hope for, señora," cried the colonel, eagerly. "They told me that you had left the hacienda."

"It is barely possible they may have been mistaken. There are some parts of this castle which have never been explored by our servants, señor. I demand of you what you are doing in it, and how you dare to take these liberties in my father's house?"

"The right of a conqueror, fair lady; the capture of my bow and my spear. I assure you that, beyond drinking some of the good wines which your worthy father has had the good sense to place in his cellar, we have done no harm."

"Your thievish propensities may have a sudden stop, señor," said Inez. "But, it was more for another object that I asked to see you. Keep off; do not come near me."

"I only wish to speak my adoration for you, upon my knees."

"Adoration! And this is the gentleman who could say, 'I do not love Inez La Vega as I love Juanetta Guzman.' That was a very, very cruel thing to say."

"Ha! Then you are the ghost which walks and plays music in this old building?"

"I have that honor, señor colonel."

"It was an unfair trap, but it is better to know my mind. I propose to marry you for the purpose I have before stated. You are here, and in my power."

"I am not."

"It looks like it. How do you propose to escape from me? Your brother is on my side, for he loves my old *amorata*, Juanetta."

"My brother is not here."

"How know you that?"

"You forget that 'Nita has just left me, and that she **knows** every one who entered the hacienda."

"Did she tell you that I brought a priest with me, and that I intended to be married to-night?"

"She did not, not being informed upon the subject," replied Inez, quietly.

"I believe upon my life the woman is trying to make sport of me. Beware what you do, Inez La Vega. I have sworn to make you my wife, and having done so, I will be true to you all my life long. What I may have said I retract. You are beautiful, and from this hour I will tear Juanetta's image from my heart and enshrine yours there."

"Think what you are saying, sir. The love of a woman like Juanetta Guzman is not to be bought or sold. You have said that she loves you dearly, and would sacrifice her life for your sake. Why then would you sacrifice her for one who can never care for you—whose faith is given to another."

"Let me speak to you," he said, coming nearer.

"Go back?" she commanded.

He continued to advance, and she put her hand into the pocket of the sack she wore, and took out a silver-mounted pistol, and the sharp click of the lock sounded in his ears.

"Go back!" she repeated.

"You would not dare to fire," he gasped, falling suddenly back.

"Would I not? I warn you, as you value your life, not to try it. I come to you to beg you to do justice to the woman who loves you, and to leave me to pursue my way in peace. I will not allow you to lay a hand upon me."

"But, Inez—" he began, again taking a step in advance. She again raised the pistol to a level with his breast, and put her finger on the trigger.

"Leave the room," she said. "I wish to be alone."

He began to bluster, but she looked so wickedly at him that he thought discretion the better part of valor and left the room, muttering threats of vengeance against her. Determined not to give her a chance of escape, he called two half drunken men who were roaming vaguely through the halls in search of mischief, and left them to guard this door while he looked for better substitutes.

"She is cunning," he murmured, "and how divinely beautiful the jade is! I was a fool to say that I did not love her, but who dreamed that *she* was the ghost? I will go down and find some sober men, if such a thing is possible in this place, to keep guard over the door."

He found it a difficult task. Wine had been running like water, and his whole force was gloriously drunk, a thing unheard of in a regular battalion, but which can not be helped in a force like this. He began to doubt whether it had been a good idea to come to the hacienda after all. After careful search he decided that the men he had already found were as much to be trusted as any, and, after a rather loud anathema against his senior major, who had allowed the men to drink so much wine, he called out a red-faced, jolly-looking priest who was enjoying himself at the wine as well as the rest, and went out into the hall.

"Confound it, Father Peter, could you think of no other time to get drunk? I want you especially, just now."

"What for, my son?" said Father Peter. "I'm as well able to perform the functions of my office as ever in my life."

"I have found this girl I intend to marry, Inez La Vega. Come with me."

The priest followed him with an unsteady step up the stairs to the room in which Inez was confined, and the colonel pushed open the door. The room was empty, but just below the window a sliding panel was opened, revealing a flight of steps leading downward. With an oath of anger, the colonel darted in, closely followed by his two men, now sufficiently sobered. They found themselves in the vaults beneath the hacienda, which had numberless passages branching off to the right and left, but, in the midst of the main passage, a pistol in each hand, stood the Quadroon Spy.

"Back, infamous wretch!" he cried. "Whom do you pursue?"

"Inez La Vega, boy. Stand aside as you value your life, for I would not have *your* blood upon my hands."

"Down with the pizen critters!" shouted the cheerful voice of Ned Dimmick. "Don't let 'em escape!" From every side, obedient to the word, the troop of rangers poured out upon them. Taken in the toils, the outlaw only thought of vengeance, and lifting his hand he fired at the spy, who still maintained his position in front. The next moment the guerrilla chief was beaten down and trampled under foot, while over his body poured the rangers into the hacienda, to wreak vengeance upon the infamous band, yet at their drunken orgies. Taken by surprise, half-armed as they were, they could make little head against their impetuous assailants. In five minutes all was over, and the Texans stood cheering in the great court-yard. Ralph Lennox had received in his arms the insensible form of the Quadroon Spy, and hurried up to the upper rooms, where he left the rangers to do their work unaided, while he unbuttoned the jacket of the spy to find his wound. As he did so, he uttered a low cry of surprise, and looked closely into the face of the wounded boy.

"Water, bring water, some of you! God of heaven, if *she* dies, woe to all who have ever fought under the banner of Mexico!"

The spy struggled out of his arms and rose hastily. "I am not hurt, captain, only stunned. Let us go and aid the rangers. Hark; they are at work."

"Inez!" cried Lennox. "Is this you?"

"Ah!" she cried, with a despairing look. "He knows it; I can do no more work for Texas!"

"You have done enough to surround your name with a halo of glory forever," cried Ralph, as he clasped her in his arms. "My darling, how did you escape, when we knew Egerton's unerring aim?"

"See," said Inez, putting her hand into her bosom and drawing forth a battered locket. "This, your dear gift, has saved me. The bullet struck the case and glanced, but I was stunned by the sudden shock."

He held her to his breast, close up to his beating heart, and

as he did so, the resounding cheers announced the victory, and the señor, Ned Dimmick and Long Bill Epps came in.

"We have won," cried the señor. "Ha, what is this? I thought I saw this brave boy fall."

"Father!" cried Inez. "Do you not know me?"

The brave old man staggered as if a bullet had struck him, and she threw herself into his arms.

"I can thank God now," said he, fervently, "that if my only son has fought upon the side of the oppressor, at least you have redeemed my name. Did any one suspect you all this time?"

"One only. Ned Dimmick found me out, but did not betray me. I owe you all some explanation. I have deceived you in many ways, but I hope my reasons were good. You, Ned Dimmick, know that I was not long at a time with the rangers, but always upon the scout. During that time, my father thought me in Matamoras, at his brother's, when in reality I was in the saddle, doing what I could for Texas. My uncle, who is in heart a friend of Texas, favored the design by sending favorable reports of me from time to time. During the time which has passed since the first attack upon the hacienda, my father thought I was in the house of an old adherent of the family, who lives in the forest a few miles from here. My disguises I have hidden in various places, and I have various costumes, so that I have appeared as the idiot boy, as Guy Gaudet, and Inez La Vega whenever I chose. By turning the garments of Guy Gaudet, I can in a moment appear as the idiot. After you rode away after the repulse of Egerton, Ralph, I ran down into the vaults, where I also keep duplicates of my disguises, dressed as Guy Gaudet, and rode away upon the trail of Egerton. On the way I saw the capture of the man Swinburne, and hurried to give you notice, but I did not know that Egerton was near."

But how had the rangers been admitted into the vaults of the hacienda, and how was she enabled to enter when she liked?

A hundred yards from the hacienda, at the back, was a deep gully, through which a torrent had once roared, but which was now dry. To this gully La Vega had constructed a secret passage, years ago, by the aid of men who had left

the country not long after. But this was to be used only upon desperate occasions, and Señor La Vega had never revealed it to any one except his daughter, and she had told him that Guy Gaudet had learned the secret through her means. Many things were explained in a moment, when Inez gave a cry of surprise and ran to the secret panel, which was still open. Juanetta stood there, in her glorious beauty, dragging by the shoulders the insensible body of Egerton.

"Touch him not," she cried. "He is mine now; mine, when you have trampled the life out of his body. A curse upon you, for you have made life a burden to me."

"Let me help you," said Inez.

"Stand aside, you brown-faced imp. It is through you that I am made desolate."

Inez put her gently aside, and laid her hand upon the breast of Egerton.

"He lives," she said, "and will come to himself in a moment. Attend to him, major; you know the most about surgery of any one here. For the present let me bid you good-by, while I appear as Inez La Vega."

She went to her own room, and came back resplendant in beauty, the dark color gone from her face and hands, and dressed as became her sex.

"I do not wonder that he loves you," said Juanetta, sadly; and "you were not to blame."

"Hush," said Inez. "I myself have heard him speak in terms of glowing eulogy of you, and say that he only cared for my wealth and should love you always."

Egerton had come to his senses and had risen on his elbow, staring wildly about him. He saw that all was lost, and understood that Inez La Vega was lost to him, and that all his hopes were in the dust.

"Help me to rise," he said. "I am very weak from loss of blood and can do no harm. My band is broken and I am a prisoner, and yet perhaps it may not be boasting if I say that I have done something for Mexico. What will you do with me?"

"You will be sent under parole to Santa Anna's army, and if they will release Major Withers, we will accept him in exchange for you."

" You are kinder than I dared to hope. Juanetta, I am a broken man, and have been a great scoundrel to you. If I send for that villainous old priest, will you marry me and go with me to Matamoras?"

" I will go with you even to the death!" she answered, giving him both hands.

It was a strange bridal, there in the old hacienda, the circle of rough men about, the torches flaring in their hands and the bridegroom still stained with gore, and weak from loss of blood. The morning was near at hand when the service was over, and Egerton expressed a wish to go at once. The horses were brought out and under the escort of four rangers they rode away, this couple so strangely joined together. They never met again, but when the army of Mexico broke into Queretara, and that misguided Austrian, Maxamilian, met his death, Egerton, a gray-haired man, commanded a brigade under Diaz.

The lesson which he received in early life had been of service to him, and the unexpected kindness which he had met with at the hands of Dimmick's Rangers had touched that better nature which Guy Gaudelet was so confident he possessed, if only once awakened.

The struggle of Texas is a part of our history, and when it was ended, no men had greater honor than the gallant rangers. But, Guy Gaudelet was seen no more. Immediately after the scenes at the hacienda they sent her to New Orleans, far from the scene of war, fearing that her enthusiastic temper and her love for Texas, would lead her again into the fray. Lennox fought on until the crowning struggle at San Jacinto, and came out with a colonel's commission, which he afterward retained in the State guard. The next month after the battle Inez came back from New Orleans, and married the man of her choice. And oftentimes in the after days they would sit with their children beside their own noble river, and he would tell the deeds of Guy Gaudelet, in the service of the Lone Star.

Ned Dimmick fell at the head of his men, five years after, in a bloody battle with the Comanches on the Santa Fe trail. Bill Epps lived many years, and used to sleep upon a jaguar skin pierced by a lance.

"Boys," he would say, as he pointed to the skin, "Guy Gaudet did that. And Guy Gaudet is Mrs. Lennox, on the ranche yonder, and here's what is ready to die for her to-morrer."

And they drank her health with all the honors.

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